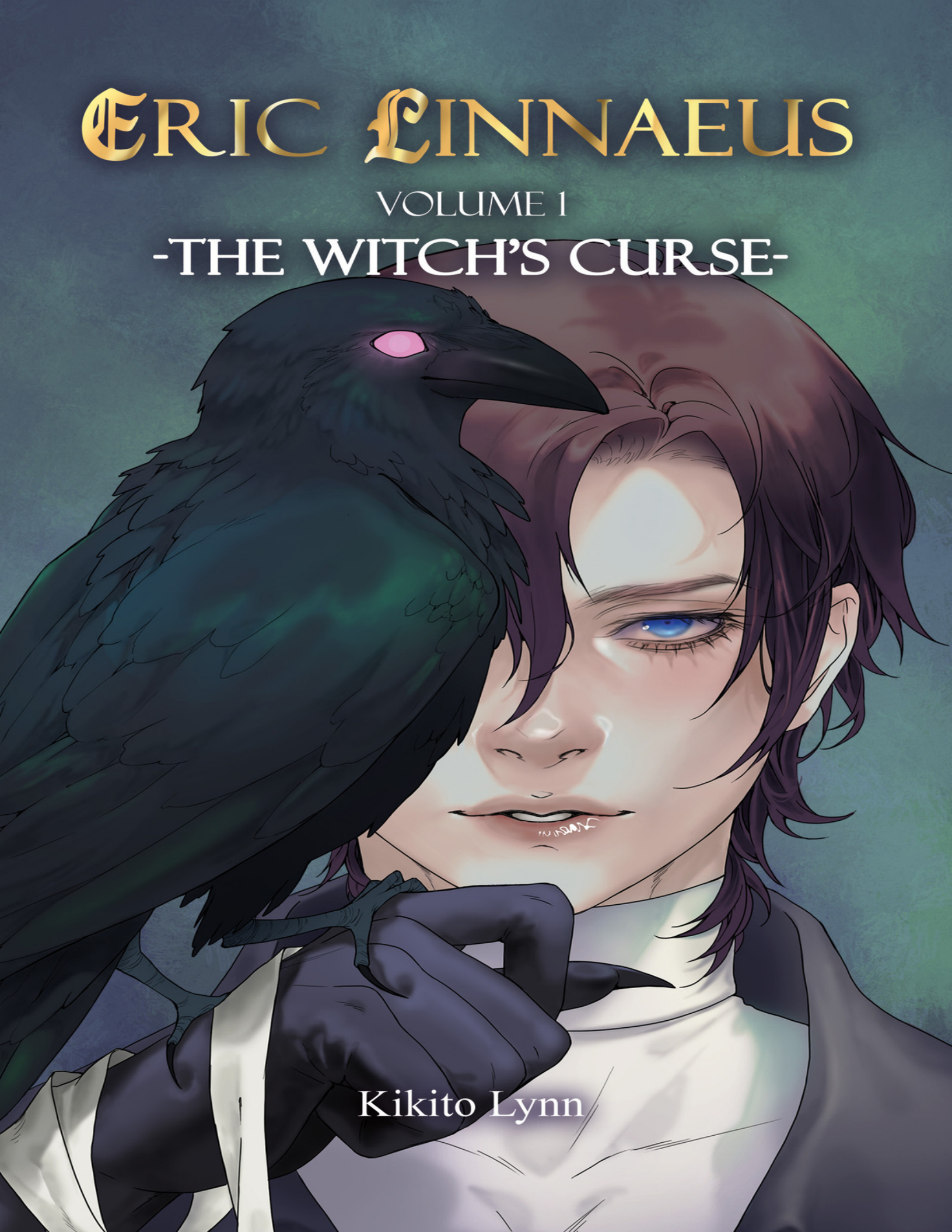
ERIC LINNAEUS

VOLUME 1

-THE WITCH'S CURSE-



Kikito Lynn

ERIC LINNAEUS

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A KIKITO LYNN Story.

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The

Eric Linnaeus Series

Book 1:

- The Witch's Curse -

Book 2:

- Scorned Heirs -

Book 3:

- A Family of Unkindness -

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Prologue
I Hate That Man

James Barrett: May, 1968

Blood dripped slowly from the ceiling into a puddle on the floor, and I sat in shock *waiting*. Was it over? All was still. Only the rasp of my shallow breaths broke the silence until the approach of footsteps marked his return.

“Are you going to get up?”

I flinched when he spoke, his voice was deceptively angelic. Had I not personally witnessed what he had just done, I would never have believed it.

“James,” he demanded more firmly calling my attention.

“Is it over?” I whispered meekly; I dared not look up at him. I didn’t want to see the unnatural glint of his eyes in the darkness, or that grotesque limb with blackened claws he called an arm.

“…For now, yes.”

- Deputy James Barrett.

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Chapter 1
This is Why my Job Sucks

Charles Walsh: May, 1998.

A single shrill scream carried across the mountaintop. It echoed through the trees, startling the birds and nearly deafening me.

“It’s alright; the worst part is over,” I assured the woman calmly, doing my best to maintain a professional tone of voice while, in truth, I was trying not to panic. I was still a rookie on the job, and she was the most uncooperative patient I had encountered.

“Don’t touch it! **Don’t** touch it!” she wailed, her voice rising in panic as I delicately examined her ankle. It was badly sprained, but the shoe was off now, and she would be fine. This was the third accident of the day. Being early spring, there was a bit of unexpected ice on the trail that routinely caught inexperienced hikers by surprise, and that meant there were a lot of injuries.

I should say: I like my job, ah, most of the time at least. Days like these made me a little less enthusiastic, but overall, it wasn’t so bad. I worked in a dual role as a Deputy Officer-Ranger, for the county Sheriff’s office in a middle-of-nowhere tourist town somewhere in Maine. Though, if I had known then what I know now… Well, I might not have taken the position.

Unusual things have always happened in the wooded areas of Maine, and it seems the closer you get to the Appalachian Mountains, the stranger they become. The locals have a set of general rules: don’t go outside after dark; don’t answer voices that come from the woods; and if you feel as if something is watching you, don’t look back. I believed these rules to be little more than superstition.

I had made my way home in the dark plenty of times and had never seen anything out of the ordinary. The worst I had ever encountered was a drunk wandering down an old service trail, and he had run off into the woods as I approached, so no harm done.

But I digress. I took the injured hiker back down the mountain on her own private VIP tour, aka: the ATV experience, which seemed to put her in

much better spirits. I handed her over to the paramedics, then made my way back to the station.

When I got back, Sheriff Barrett, my boss, was waiting for me. He was a grumpy old man with a no-nonsense attitude and a lousy sense of humor. His hair was thinning and gray. He sported a thick mustache, and his eyebrows resembled chunky caterpillars. “Did you have fun out there, Deputy Charles? We could hear the screams from all the way down here,” he amused himself at my expense.

“Oh yeah, nothing wrong with her lung capacity,” I agreed, dejected. I dumped my gear down on the desk, knowing full well I was going to have to type out yet *another* report about this. Paperwork was my least favorite part of the job.

“Actually, before you get comfortable, we’ve had another request come in,” he sat forward to toss an envelope in my direction. The folder slid onto my desk, and I picked it up curiously, flipping through the pages as I skimmed over it.

“A whole group is missing?” I asked skeptically. *That was unusual*.

“Yep. They were due back yesterday. No one’s seen ‘em yet, and they haven’t checked in.”

“Right, I’ll go check it out then,” I was saved from the paperwork.

Honestly, I wasn’t too worried. Sometimes campers go out and enjoy themselves so much that they decide to stay an extra day without notifying us. It’s a bit of a pain, but what can you do? It’s not usually a worst-case scenario.

Having said that, each year thousands of people *do* vanish on the mountain, and in rare instances, some die. But most of the cases are average and solvable, or at least; there’s a reasonably logical explanation for what happened. For example, campers go hiking and get lost, people are killed in disputes over illegal activities, some purposefully hurt themselves in remote places, and so on.

Rarely do we stumble across anything entirely unexplainable, where the evidence denies any reasonable conclusion, and there are more questions than answers. Things like deaths so bizarre we’re not entirely sure what happened, or disappearances with mysterious circumstances surrounding them... Though I hadn’t, at that point, had any such cases.

In the area's past, there were some massacres and a couple of intriguing cases that remain unsolved. Nowadays, the only time it gets even mildly busy is during the late spring to early fall, hiking season, when tourists show up in droves. It's like the zombie apocalypse, only it's sweaty guys trying to impress their partners with the stamina they don't have, and middle-aged women angry at nature itself, instead of the living dead. Personally, I would have almost preferred it if the undead wanted to hike the trails.

Aside from that, virtually nothing ever happened where I worked. The town's crime rate was so low that our station was essentially little more than a glorified log cabin, and there weren't more than a handful of us officers. I was the youngest and most inexperienced of us, so no one really paid me any mind. Diane was the only woman in our station. She was a plump, friendly lady, and while she was also an officer, she mostly handled the receptionist work rather than field patrols.

Anyway, I was glad to be back outside again and to have an assignment that varied slightly from my usual duties. Ordinarily, most of my days were spent patrolling up and down the mountain. I was to ensure the trail was clear of debris, check on campers and assist any injured hikers. It was quite repetitive. There's only so many sprained ankles one can show enthusiasm for, as you can imagine.

The fresh mountain air and the surroundings were pristine. Everything was a lush green, there was a cool breeze filtering through the trees, and the forest was teeming with life. I puttered along slowly on my ATV; I didn't want to scare or squash any wildlife (or people). Countless small animals would scurry away into hiding as I passed, and I enjoyed being outside in nature.

Birds sang overhead, and I was stopped a couple of times by tourists asking for directions and/or photos. Apparently, local law enforcement is exciting. Or maybe they just liked a man in uniform. Who knows? Truth be told, I wasn't in as much of a rush as I probably should have been, so when the call came in over the radio for a status update on my location, I felt instantly guilty.

'Hey Charles, are you nearly at the site?' Diane sounded cheerful.

"Hi, yeah, I'm about halfway there…" I admitted sheepishly.

‘Only halfway? What are you doing, taking a stroll?’ She chastised.

“No, Ma’am. I’ll hurry it up.”

‘You better.’ I knew she was only half joking, and I got a move on.

According to the report, the group in question was supposed to consist of nine people: four adults and five children. The youngest member was six, and the eldest was sixty-seven; it was a party of two families. As I approached the area, the forest around me gradually became still and silent. I didn’t even notice at first, but soon the birdsong had stopped entirely. The only sound was the hum of the ATV and the crunch of twigs under tires. It was eerie, to say the least. I rolled into the clearing where the group was supposed to have camped and shut off the engine.

The sense of foreboding I got as I approached was almost overwhelming. It was as if the atmosphere itself was suddenly weighed down by dread, and I could intrinsically feel that something was wrong. Because of this, I investigated with caution. There was evidence that the group had been there: flattened ground cover, boot prints in the dirt, and a campfire that was still smoldering.

However, the site was *too* clean. There were no other personal effects left behind; not even so much as a single piece of litter was left. It was against park policy to leave a lit fire unattended, so one would expect that a group who couldn’t be bothered dampening their fire wouldn’t be the kind that would clean up so thoroughly. It was like these people, and everything they had brought with them, had simply evaporated, leaving no trace.

The logical part of my brain told me they had probably just moved on and forgotten about the fire. But, if that was the case, why hadn’t they returned yet? I came from the only direction they could have traveled to go back down the mountain and hadn’t passed any groups matching their description. As I examined the area further, I noticed that a portion of the surrounding brush seemed to be damaged. Squashed a bit as if people had moved through it. *Had they gone hiking off the marked trail?* I decided to radio for backup and then followed the new path through the broken foliage.

It wasn’t long before I spotted something bright blue high in the trees ahead. Mild anxiety churned in my gut, and I proceeded with slightly less confidence as the bad feeling I had intensified. I was beginning to fear the

worst - what if that spot of color was a person hanging dead in the tree? I hadn't seen a dead body in person before, and it wasn't something I was eager to experience.

As such, I proceeded with a healthy skepticism and was relieved to discover that it was only a tent. The thin fabric swayed gently in the breeze, and I became uneasy. It really was a *very* odd place for a tent to be. Aside from being wrapped around a tree at dizzying heights, it also seemed to be entirely intact with no obvious signs of damage. At least it wasn't a mutilated body, but how exactly it had become entangled some 30-odd feet up in this tree was beyond me. It was too purposefully placed for it to have simply blown up there, while at the same time, it was so spectacularly high up that I couldn't imagine anyone risking life and limb to put it up there for no apparent reason. Which begged the question, who had put it up there? Moreover, *why*?

"Hello? Is there anyone out here?" I called nervously. I wasn't sure that I expected, nor even wanted, a response from the woods. This was a little too spooky for me. Seconds stretched out into minutes, and the sound of my voice died out in the vast silence unanswered.

As I approached, I noticed a small circular charm hanging from one of the lower branches by a strand of thread. It was made of thorns and what appeared to be small animal bones interwoven with twine. It also looked aged, as if it had been in the weather for quite some time. "...*Yep*. That's fine," I told myself after looking it over and deciding I had no desire whatsoever to touch it.

Moving past the tree and its creepy artifacts, I continued down the path. Gently pushing past overhanging branches and stepping over fallen logs as I navigated. It was around this time that I started to feel watched and remembered the local superstition: *'If you feel watched, don't look back.'* - *Yeah. Right*, I thought sarcastically. It was completely ridiculous. If I was being stalked by a mountain cat or something, I wanted to know. Ignorance does you no good in the wild.

Still, I didn't want to appear nervous, so I swiveled slowly to survey the immediate area again. Looking with my eyes only, I scanned the foliage from one side to the other for predators. As far as I could tell, there was nothing. I was alone. So why was my heart beating so fast? The sound of

blood rushing in my ears was nearly deafening. What subconscious piece of information was warning me of a danger I couldn't see?

Unfortunately, it was at this very moment that the radio on my shoulder crackled to life, scaring me half to death. 'Hello Charles, it's Diane again. I'm sorry no one is available for backup. Can you please advise on your location?'

I took a second to recover from the near heart attack and regain my composure before answering. "I'm just a little ways off the campsite. I found a tent high up in a tree. I'm not sure how it got up there. But I don't think I'm going to need backup after all. There's no one here."

'That's a little odd,' she hesitated before adding, 'You stay safe out there, and keep us updated.'

"Yes Ma'am," I sighed to myself, feeling mildly reassured. Somehow just hearing someone else's voice was comforting.

With renewed confidence, I carried on until I came across a river. The edges of it were muddy, with signs of people having been there recently. I could make out distinctive shoe impressions, and alongside them, something else. It was what looked like a large animal print in the soft earth. It could have been a bear- if bears had extra toes? Otherwise, I had no idea. It wasn't similar to anything I had come across before.

I took out my camera to take a few pictures for evidence, using a dollar bill for scale. The strange print was huge. Well, bigger than the dollar. I scrutinized the length of the river to see if I could tell where they might have exited on the other side. There didn't seem to be any worn-down areas visible from where I stood, so I walked further downstream. I assumed that if they traveled in the riverbed for whatever reason, it would be easier for them to move with the current rather than against it.

Along the way, there were more strange footprints. Some seemed to have five toes, while others had seven. *Were they left by two different animals?* I wondered. Then I began to find items. First I came across a shoe, then cooking pots, clothing, and a partially torn sleeping bag. The further I went, the more items I found. I called out at frequent intervals, making sure to give pause to listen for any response. No one ever answered. It was becoming clear that this was more than campers getting excited and exploring. These people had been running for their lives.

The sun was beginning to get low, and I followed the river more urgently, breaking into a light jog. If I was going to find them, I had a much better chance to do so during the daylight hours. I continued until my muscles ached and rested briefly with my hands on my knees as I caught my breath. *I should probably lay off the donuts*, I thought with mild amusement. Sweat made the tips of my hair cling uncomfortably, and I splashed some of the river water on the back of my neck. It was colder than anticipated, and the regret was instant.

Still, I gave myself another minute or so before I faced the truth. I hadn't stopped purely because I was exhausted. I had stopped because I knew in my gut that it was over. I was out of time. The sun was setting, and the mountain cast a long shadow over the forest, making it astoundingly dark beneath the canopy. Soon the creatures of the night would emerge from their burrows, and if I didn't turn back, I would probably end up getting lost myself. But that didn't make the decision any easier. The chances of finding lost people alive decrease significantly with each day, and surviving a night in the wilderness isn't easy. Temperatures can drop below zero, nocturnal predators patrol the woods, and the terrain itself is infinitely more dangerous in the dark.

So it was with great reluctance that I made the decision to return to the clearing. When I passed by the tree with the tent again, I made sure to leave a note pinned to it, just in case the campers found their way back. Then I called Diane on the radio to report in.

"Diane, I'm almost back at the ATV now."

'Deputy Charles. Where were you!? I have been trying to reach you. Why didn't you answer?' She sounded angry, which stirred a new anxiety in me, and my palms started to sweat. I was still probationary after all.

"I followed the river and found some supplies. There were also a few strange footprints, I'll clarify when I get back, but it looks like a rescue effort will need to be coordinated," I tried to explain myself. I hadn't heard my radio go off at any point while I was searching. I assumed maybe it had been out of range while I was exploring. Good to know that if I *had* fallen into the river or something, I would have been totally on my own.

'What kind of prints did you find?' She asked more calmly this time, though the edge of annoyance in her voice remained.

“I’m not sure; they were big though. Maybe some kind of bear?” I knew without a doubt that this wasn’t what they were, but I didn’t want to seem like I had wasted time or didn’t know what I was doing.

‘Just come back now. The Sheriff wants you back before it’s dark. So, hurry.’ Her directions were sharp and left no room for interpretation. I think this made me more anxious because I could tell there was something she was withholding.

I returned to the original clearing to find the ATV lying on its side and stared at it dumbfounded with an increasing sense of apprehension. It was a four-wheeler and nearly 700 pounds. No way someone just *accidentally* pushed it over like that. Still mildly confused, I braced myself and pulled it back upright. The force it took confirmed that this had to have been done on purpose, and that meant I wasn’t as alone in the dark, scary woods as I might have hoped. It was all I could do not to panic. What you don’t know can and definitely will, kill you, if given the chance.

To avoid looking as spooked, I made an effort to start up the vehicle as nonchalantly as possible and side-eyed the forest subtly. Initially, nothing seemed amiss. There wasn’t any ominous shape lurking in the shadows or unnatural glowing eyes, just dense trees and endless silence. I was about to dismiss the bad feeling I had as generalized anxiety when a twig snapped. My attention fixated in the direction of the sound, and an inhuman scream erupted from the darkness. It was unlike anything I had ever heard and unnervingly close.

It had only been a single, short sound, but it was deafening. It reverberated low and long through the trees causing all the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end. There’s nothing even remotely comparable to the feeling of unequivocal dread it gave me, and I absolutely did not want to stick around to find out what made that sound. So you can bet your ass I made my way back to the office tout *fucking* suite.

***

When I arrived, Sheriff Barrett was waiting for me, standing with his arms folded, watching the horizon. I felt like a teenager caught sneaking home. “You made it back. I was beginning to wonder,” he stated gruffly, and for the briefest moment, I thought he looked relieved to see me.

“Yeah. Someone knocked over the ATV. It took me a second to get it back up again,” I mumbled the excuse for the time it had taken me. I was still shaking like a leaf. All the adrenaline that had kept me going was starting to wear off, and my knees felt weak. I think he could probably tell from the look in my eyes how terrified I had been.

“What did you see out there?” he sounded dire, like he knew something I didn’t.

“I- I don’t know, Sheriff. The reported campsite was empty, and when I investigated further, I saw a trail that led deeper into the woods. I think they went that way. I also found a tent tangled in some trees. But I don’t know how they got it up so high? I mean, it was *really* high up there-” I spoke rapidly, getting caught up in my thoughts before I collected myself, “I followed their path along the river. There were some personal effects and large footprints. I took photos-”

“Show me the photos,” he cut me off, paying no mind to the rest of what I had said.

I pulled out the camera to show him, and he took it without saying anything more. He clicked through the photos silently with an ever-deepening frown on his brow, “Should we call the neighboring county to organize a search and rescue?” I asked hesitantly. I got the *distinct* feeling I had done something wrong, even if the only wrong I had done was simply having been out there at all.

“It’s too dangerous to send people into the woods at night. If they’re alive out there, they’ll have to survive on their own until daybreak,” he said grimly as he turned on his heel to walk back inside.

“We can’t just leave them out there-” I protested.

“We can, and we will. You don’t know what’s in those woods.”

I grit my teeth. He was a superstitious old bastard, afraid of shadows in the dark. “I’ll go. Every hour we do nothing is an hour wasted. People’s lives are at stake.”

“I said, **no**. And you’ll do as I say unless you want to be fired. You hear me, boy?” he snapped.

“Yes,” I answered bitterly. I hate to admit it, but I needed this job.

He watched me with a stern expression for a long moment before he sighed, rubbing his face and stroking down his mustache, “We aren’t equipped to deal with this, Charles. We’re going to have to call Linnaeus.”

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Chapter 2
My Co-workers Also Suck

Charles Walsh: May, 1998.

I didn't know who 'Linnaeus' was. It's a small town, if he was local, I'm sure I would have heard the name before. I spent half the night thinking over how cagey Barrett had gotten about some footprints in the woods, and the other half speculating about what I had heard. I was sure he was hiding something, but I couldn't decide what I thought it was. Why had he seemed so reluctant to call in help? And what kind of specialist would be useful when we didn't even know *exactly* what we were dealing with? *That was probably something else Barrett wouldn't tell me*, I thought indignantly.

When I arrived at work the following morning, an unfamiliar motorcycle was parked out front. It was a vintage model BMW, painted black with chrome accents, and sported unusual whitewall tires, making it stand out against the dirt. The seat was leather, and I gave it a wide berth. Whoever's it was, it looked expensive, and I wouldn't want to accidentally scratch the paint or something.

I made a conscious effort to be pleasant when I entered the office. The Sheriff's inaction the night before still didn't sit right with me, but in the interest of keeping the peace, I decided to at least try. Maybe he would even be willing to explain if I played nice. "Good morning," I greeted the office warmly and was subsequently met with an uncomfortable silence.

Were they still angry about last night as well? The atmosphere was tense. Diane sat stiffly at her desk. Her usually cheerful disposition was instead an expression of displeasure with lips pursed tightly, although she did give me a sly smile as I set down a box of donuts on the corner of her desk. "I hope you're ready for this, kid," she commented, eyeing off a jam-filled pastry.

"You know me, I'm ready for anything," I assured a little too enthusiastically, trying to inject some life into the room. "Where's the Sheriff?"

"In his office. Knock first," she warned.

“Right,” I agreed nervously as I headed past the reception area to the office.

Did they find a body? Or was I wrong after all, and it was all just a wild goose chase that put Barrett in bad spirits? I speculated anxiously over what new development on yesterday's disappearances could have soured the mood so dramatically.

I had almost reached the Sheriff’s office when the door opened abruptly, and Barrett came marching out. “Look, I don’t want to know the details. I just want it taken care of,” he was speaking gruffly to someone behind him.

“I understand,” an unfamiliar voice answered in an oddly neutral tone.

“I mean it; I want *you* gone the second this is over- oh, Charles, you’re early. Good. I want you to meet Eric Linnaeus.” The Sheriff’s tone changed as he noticed my presence.

Behind him, another man followed. He was of average height, handsome, and well-dressed with dark hair. But what caught my attention first was how young he seemed to be, early twenties, I guessed. So it was surprising to see that he walked with a limp. Additionally, his right arm was bandaged in a sling close to his body, leaving the sleeve of his jacket hanging empty on that side, and he relied on a cane to walk.

Taken aback, I didn’t realize I was staring until he made eye contact with me, then my blood turned to ice. His right eye was sliced, or at least that was my initial assumption. Looking closer, his left eye seemed normal and was blue in color, while the other appeared to have no whites to it. Instead, it was purple and had a dark slit through the center where the iris should have been, similar to a cat’s eye.

“It’s not polite to stare,” Eric informed me in monotone. He had a slight foreign accent that I couldn't place, and his expression was equally as hard to decipher.

“Sorry,” I apologized, feeling guilty nonetheless. “I’m Charles.”

“You’re the one who discovered the abandoned campsite.” It was a statement rather than a question, and I nodded. “Take me to where you found it,” he ordered, and I wavered, looking to Barrett for direction. I wasn’t sure whether or not I was supposed to take commands from this man.

“Do as he asks; you might learn something from him. In fact, consider him to be your team lead until this matter is resolved… *I want nothing to do with it.*” Sheriff Barrett muttered the last part mostly to himself.

We took out the utility vehicle instead of the ATV because it had two seats, and I didn't think he could ride on his own, given his condition. Of course, the trail was, by now, closed due to the disappearances. So travel was a lot faster since I didn’t have to worry about running over any tourists. The clouds from the day before had stayed, and despite not actually raining yet, they cast a gloomy haze over the forest, making the air feel heavy.

This was usually the kind of weather that encouraged wildlife to come out. But instead, the entire area was uncharacteristically devoid of life. The usual sounds of birdsong and small animals rustling in the leaves was non-existent. It was like entering a dead zone where only the whirr of the UTV engine broke the silence.

“So, Sheriff Barrett called you in? Do you have special experience with this kind of case?” I asked to make light conversation.

Eric was quiet before answering carefully, “You could say that.”

“I’m surprised then; you seem so young,” I commented with a laugh.

“I’m older than I look,” he answered plainly.

“Right, well, are you sure you’ll be okay out here? I mean, the terrain is kind of rough…” I wasn’t trying to be rude, but I had doubts that he would be able to navigate off-trail.

“I’ll be fine.”

“How did you get hurt anyway? If you don’t mind my asking, what happened to your-”

“You talk a lot when you’re nervous. It’s annoying,” he commented curtly, and my mouth snapped shut. It’s true that I did tend to talk more to release nervous energy, but a simple, *‘I don’t want to talk about it’* would have sufficed. That was probably the first moment I decided I didn’t like him.

His strange monotone and lack of human emotion bothered me, especially in the unsettling ambiance of the woods. It was almost like he took on the personality of the forest, or like it took on his.

When we arrived at the abandoned campsite, everything was as I had left it the day prior. Silent, empty, and oddly terrifying. I radioed back to let the station know we'd reached our destination and listened dutifully as Barrett responded sternly, 'You be careful out there now. Stay near Linnaeus in case anything happens, you understand me?'

"Copy that," I grumbled. It felt like I had been assigned a babysitter on a job I was more than capable of handling on my own.

Eric stepped out of the UTV and began investigating the area for himself. I don't know what he thought he might find, I had already looked it over yesterday, and there was nothing. Maybe he just enjoyed wasting his time. Begrudging, I hopped off the UTV to follow him. Walking over the trampled site was unsettling. The sound of that inhuman scream echoed through my thoughts, and fear trickled through my veins.

Ahead Eric was now moving down the same unmarked path I had traveled the day prior. He looked out of place amongst the foliage, too '*à la mode'* for the wilderness, I thought sarcastically. Watching this guy with his chrome capped cane and impractically high-collared overcoat, he was far too neat and proper. *I bet he'd show some emotion if he got mud on his boots.* I mused to myself.

"There's a tree with a tent caught high in the branches up that way. That's about where I found the footprints," I spoke as I trailed after him.

"I can see it. Although, the rain has probably washed away any footprints," he answered plainly.

When I caught up with him, he was examining the strange charm in the tree, "Was this here yesterday?"

"Yes. I don't know what it is." He obviously wasn't listening to me, as he was already moving on before I finished responding.

Unfortunately, he was right when he assumed the rain would wash away the evidence. There was no longer a clear trail past the tree. The storm that blew through during the night had disturbed the prints, and I doubted we could track anything specific now. This is why it surprised me when Eric continued on.

He stumbled with his cane and almost fell over a branch, which seemed to annoy him. "Fine," he muttered to himself, frustrated, then his gait suddenly evened out as he resumed pushing through the brush. I wondered

how that was possible and what had just happened. I couldn't see any difference from moments before, yet he appeared to be moving more easily now.

When he got to the river, he stopped. "You said you found items scattered about but no signs of exiting footprints?" Eric asked as he crouched down to inspect the edge of the water.

"Yeah. If they went into the river, I never found the spot where they got out. I only found some more of those strange prints down that way," I pointed downstream distractedly, still trying to understand what I had witnessed. Were my eyes playing tricks on me?

"Did you travel upstream?" he asked casually.

"… No…" I responded hesitantly. I expected he would chastise me. However, with this information, he simply stood and started making his way up the river without saying another word.

This time I watched him more closely. I had been concerned about him navigating the uneven riverbed prior, yet now he was more agile than he should have been, and I was beginning to wonder exactly how injured he truly was. We traveled on for some time, but there didn't seem to be any indication that the missing campers had come this way, and progress forward stopped when we reached the base of a large waterfall. It seemed unlikely that anyone would try to climb over it. That was a relief; he *was probably wrong. The campers must have gone downstream after all*…

"They left the water here," he announced casually. He was standing only a few yards away from the base of the waterfall and looking toward the forest.

"How can you tell?" I was sure he was making it up.

He deliberated as if deciding what exactly he should tell me, "I'm very good at guessing."

"And I'm just supposed to go with that?"

"Yes."

He began to make his way off into the woods, and I followed him begrudgingly. Not because I agreed with or believed him, but because I had no choice. If he was supposed to be my 'team lead' for the time being, then it wasn't my place to argue. To tell you the truth, it was my opinion that he

didn’t have the first clue what he was doing. He was probably some hot shot that had lied on his resume, just like he was lying about being impaired, and would inevitably end up lost within the hour. Then it would be up to me to find our way back.

So when, after less than fifteen minutes, we found a teddy bear amongst the foliage, my pride shriveled up. It seemed, despite appearances, that Eric might know what he was doing after all.

“Have you ever seen a dead body before?” he asked me calmly as he picked up the stuffed bear.

“No…” I admitted, “Why?”

“… It seems… likely, that we will come across a body soon,” he said carefully, “Please do your best to prepare yourself for such an event.”

Something in the way he said it made me feel like he already knew what we were going to find. There was no doubt in his voice, and I couldn’t help but think about what we would uncover: the child that owned this teddy bear? Their parents? Their siblings? Most likely huddled together somewhere they guessed was sheltered for the night, only for the elements to overcome them. How was I going to explain to their loved ones that I could have saved them if only I had traveled upstream yesterday?

“Charles,” Eric’s voice interrupted my thoughts, and my stomach dropped.

Ahead the trees were thinning into a small clearing, and patches of bright color were strewn about the space. I didn’t need to be told what they were. I could tell it was the campers’ clothing, but I didn’t want to consider whether or not there were people still wearing them. “You can wait here if you would like,” Eric informed me without emotion. From anyone else, the sentiment might have been a kind one, but from him? I was sure it was patronizing.

I cleared my throat. “No, it’s dangerous to separate,” I tried to sound as uncaring as he did.

“Very well,” he answered more softly than I expected, and that caught me by surprise.

What we found in that clearing was worse than I had imagined. The clothing that was visible through the trees did indeed contain bodies, but

they were not huddled together for warmth. No. They had been dead long before the elements could have taken them.

Their remains were in haphazard pieces all over the clearing, torn, mangled, and partially eaten. They lay with varying expressions of fear and pain on their faces. The hardest one to look at for me was a little girl. She couldn't have been more than fourteen years old. Her torso and legs were separated, her neck stretched and bent at an awful angle. We found one of her arms on the opposite side of the clearing. It was only identifiable due to the size and because it was still in the yellow sleeve of the jacket her torso was wearing.

Aside from massive bodily dismemberment and damage, all the corpses were common in another way. They were all missing their eyes and tongues. The smell was surprisingly bearable; I guess they hadn't had enough time to fester, but I still felt nauseous.

"Go. Sit over by the edge, away from all this," Eric told me firmly. I wanted to protest. I wanted to prove myself, but the swell of breakfast threatening to make its return subdued me.

The first time you see a dead body, it changes you in profound ways. But to see people with lives, thoughts and feelings - torn apart, decimated in the way these bodies were… Well, that leaves a scar on your very soul. I think I understood then that Eric wasn't just an average asshole. The scene didn't faze him at all, and I got the impression he was someone who had seen this kind of thing a few too many times before.

I don't know how long I sat in complete silence, processing what I was seeing. "I'll call it in…" I murmured at last, trying to settle my stomach as I watched Eric analyze each body part.

"No, until we find the animal responsible, it's safer if there are fewer people on the mountain."

"Why would any animal attack like this..?" I asked meekly.

He was crouched, inspecting a severed leg at his feet when I asked the question, and he paused as he considered. Carefully looking over to me, as if he was in some way judging something before he answered, "I think it's nesting."

"Nesting?"

“Yes, the campsite was too clean. That usually only happens if it’s collecting resources: fabrics, padding, food.”

“What kind of animal does that? Does *this*?” I gestured to the bodies half-heartedly.

“No animal you would be familiar with. If I had to guess, I would say it's what you would call a ‘demon’.”

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Chapter 3
This Job Will Probably Get Me Killed

Charles Walsh: May, 1998.

When Eric said that I burst out laughing. It was an involuntary response brought on by a combination of nerves, and the genuine belief that he was messing with me to lighten the mood. However, my outburst evaporated with the look in his eyes, and I understood he wasn't joking. "I didn't say the term was accurate," he stated coldly.

In our time together, I had never seen his expression change, but I could have sworn he was contemplating killing me. There was a silent fury burning there, or maybe nothing at all. Shark eyes, that's what he had.

I coughed awkwardly and fell silent. We stayed in that clearing with the victims for a while. Eric continued whatever it was that he was doing, and I played out various scenarios of what I thought might have happened to them in my head. I pictured the group the morning before, packing up their campsite, full of joy and hope as they headed off on an unmarked trail.

Maybe they saw something of interest that lured them in that direction, or perhaps they just wanted to look at something quickly before they left. I imagined them as they came across an unknown creature in the woods, blindly tumbling through the foliage in terror as they tried to escape with low tree branches catching at their clothing and hair. I visualized their panic as they reached the river, frantically trying to decide which way to run next. One must have decided to run downstream, perhaps to deceive whatever pursued them.

Then I imagined them later in darkness, holding onto each other and desperately trying to stay quiet as they hid from the thing stalking them. It's a primal fear; being hunted. Or perhaps they never even made it to the first night. Maybe all the terror I imagined never happened, and whatever it was that set upon them could have been so efficient that they never even had time to be afraid at all.

It began to rain, and the first drops on my skin jarred me from my nightmare reverie. It was only a light misting of water that made clothing soggy and left small droplets on leaves. This is when Eric limped back over to me, his cane sinking slightly into the damp earth as he leaned on it. “You can go back now. If you would prefer,” he offered, though it came across more as an instruction.

“It’s probably against policy to leave when there’s some man-eating animal around,” I answered glumly.

“...Perhaps,” he agreed, “Regardless, you are still welcome to leave. I don’t need you any longer.”

Looking at him now, he seemed to be entertained by my shock, and my blood pressure rose. Was this asshole implying that I leave because he thinks I can’t handle this situation? I might be new to the job, but at least I look old enough to shave. I stood and looked him square in his good eye, “I don’t need to run home, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“Very well.” It sounded like he didn’t care one way or another what I chose to do, and he moved to go.

“It’s against procedure to leave a crime scene unattended!” I called after him, utterly peeved at his nonchalant arrogance.

“So stay,” he shrugged, “My job requires that I continue on. You don’t think I was called here simply to give a nod of approval that this is a dangerous animal, now do you?”

“What exactly *is* your job again?” I retorted.

“To eliminate the threat.”

Frustrated, I said nothing more as I followed him into the forest. I knew this was against policy, but he was my commander for the day, and it’s procedure to follow the instructions of a direct leader. Even if his orders were vague at best. If he was following a specific trail, I couldn’t say. It was almost like accompanying a Native tracker, except they tended to at least explain what they were looking for or tracking. He walked sure in his navigation, turning at different points with no decipherable indication as to why. I began to think he was lost and just trying to keep up appearances.

I noticed then that his damaged eye seemed to be seeing, or looking? If nothing else, it was definitely reacting to the surroundings as he moved after some unseen path, and I shuddered. It was one of the creepiest things I

had ever seen. It’s within all human instinct that things that look human but ‘not quite’ deeply unsettle us, and I was beginning to have my doubts about just how ‘human’ this man was. That’s not to say I believe in anything supernatural, more that I believe humanity can leave a person.

After a few hours of hiking through the woods and beating up the shrubbery, Eric stopped. He set his cane aside and, to my infinite surprise, began unbandaging his damaged arm. “What on earth are you doing?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“My job,” he replied without elaborating.

Under the bandages, his arm was… Odd. It was, I assumed, tattooed a dark purple, similar to his bad eye, and had a rough texture. There were smoother semi-translucent patches on his forearm that glinted a silvery color when they caught the sunlight as he unwove the bandage. It looked almost like writing, or at least very purposeful symbols, and I couldn't read whatever language they were in. I guessed it was Norse. Maybe?

Other than that, it looked human enough for the most part. I could see the muscles and veins down his forearm, but his fingers ended in long black claws. He flexed it casually, opening and closing his hand as if he hadn’t done so in quite some time, and I recoiled in horror. Stumbling backward, I nearly lost my balance. I couldn’t make sense of precisely what I was seeing. It looked so real.

“Scared?” he asked with a slight smile that showed the unnaturally perfect points of his canine teeth for the first time.

“T-that’s a heck of a surgery to have done,” I stammered, too shocked to think of anything else.

“A surgery? Can’t say I’ve heard that one before.”

“Are you trying to say it’s not?”

“You look pale, Charles. You should consider sitting down. I did tell you that you were welcome to remain with the corpses.” Even when he spoke now, his voice was still dull, completely devoid of emotion.

Then his attention fixed on me, and his eyes darkened, “If you’re going to shoot me, aim well. I don’t take kindly to that reaction,” he warned, and I realized then that I had unholstered my gun.

I couldn’t remember doing it. My mind was running a million miles an hour as my thoughts collected themselves, the pieces starting to fit together. Eric was too good at this. He knew which way the campers had run, he was able to follow a trail that I couldn’t even see, and he arrived so quickly at the station after being called despite obviously not being local. Plus, his body modifications were terrifying. Who in their right mind would do something like that? What good intention could that possibly have? He must be some kind of serial killer. *He* probably killed those campers. I bet he got off on the fear people had at seeing his appearance. He had said a ‘demon’ had done this, was he referring to himself?

I struggled to figure out some way to gain the upper hand in this situation, but he had all the advantages. Eric had led me deeper into the woods for hours; it would be dark soon, and I didn’t carry as many rounds on me as I should have. I work in a recreational park, for god's sake! I’m not supposed to need many bullets! Who would have even thought I would be sent out with a psycho killer? There was a stab of betrayal when I considered that more. Did Diane and Barrett know the truth about Eric?

Both had looked displeased to see him. Was I a sacrifice here? Were they all in on it?! My panic was interrupted by a familiar, chilling screech, the same one I had heard the night before. Only it was closer. *Much* closer. I realized then that Eric wasn’t even looking at me. His attention was focused on something past me. Feeling a wave of nausea, I slowly turned toward the sound. The creature that made it was crouched barely 20 feet away. It was recognizably once a bear, despite now having no face. Instead, it only had a mass of teeth that extended terrifyingly far back along its jaw with a patch of wrinkled skin on top of its snout. The space where its eyes should have been, was gone. But, despite this, it was still somehow tracking me.

The wrinkles on its head suddenly flared open, and I understood it was taking a deep breath in. It then turned its whole body towards me, focusing all its malice in my direction. On its shoulder was a burned patch through the fur down to the skin, and I recognized it to be the mirror image of the charm we had found in the clearing.

“Not going to shoot it?” Eric mocked, his voice cutting through the tension. With my new fear of this creature, I had forgotten about him. Truthfully, facing something that defied all reason unlocked a primal terror so pure that I can’t even accurately describe it. My mind struggled

desperately to rationalize this thing that was absolutely nothing like anything I had ever before experienced, nor even heard of. Time slowed down, and I vividly remember the next few details.

First was how calm Eric looked. It was like he was looking at something as common as a dog. Second was that when the creature jumped at me, its entire body uncoiled horrifically. Folds of skin along its sides between its limbs flared open so that it glided clumsily on makeshift wings despite its mass. I didn't have time to scream or raise my weapon. I was sure I was about to be dismembered by this mutant bear when, in an instant, Eric stood between the creature and myself.

He was there so fast I hadn't seen him move at all. He shoved me back hard, and I fell into the mud. My finger slipped on the trigger as I landed, and the gun went off just once. I have no idea where that shot went, but it only added to my disorientation as the sound was deafening and rang out in my ears. I fumbled on the ground, trying to recover while the scene unfolded. The creature screeched in rage and changed its direction mid-flight to redirect away from Eric as he pulled a sword from the center of his cane.

"Almost," he muttered, sounding mildly annoyed that it avoided him. My stomach churned. *Had he been using me as bait to lure it out?*

He pursued it without hesitation and met the thing head-on. Its mass towered over him as it stood on its hind legs and lashed out, but he didn't falter. He moved confidently and made short work of it, slashing through the thing at strategic points as it launched itself at him. When it bit down onto his modified arm, I thought that would be it; we would both die. Unbelievably that wasn't the case. The teeth didn't so much as break the skin, and the proximity allowed him to slice cleanly through the animal, if it could be called that, like a knife through butter.

Blood sprayed in all directions, covering him, me, and the surrounding vegetation while the bear-monster fell apart slowly into two separate pieces. The chunks twitched, writhing on the ground as if the thing were still alive and trying to reassemble.

In the cold air steam rose from the fresh meat, and the soft rain expanded the blood pooling exponentially. I watched, shell-shocked, as Eric moved to find the creature's shoulder. Once he did, he cut the mark off the skin before setting it alight.

The bit of flesh fizzled and squealed as it burned. It moved unnaturally, as if trying to escape the flame, but Eric stabbed the tip of the sword into it to hold it in place as it sizzled into nothing.

"W-what was, is that... *Thing*?" I asked when I remembered how to speak. I was sorry I had said anything at all, for when he remembered I was there, he pointed the blade at my face.

"It doesn't matter to you, and no one will believe anything you say. So all you need to know is that it's dead now. But, if you ever carelessly let loose a firearm around me again, I will decapitate you. Do you understand?" he muttered, rubbing the base of his ear as if it hurt.

"Yes… Sorry…"

"Good. Then, I suppose, it's fine." Amazingly he didn't seem hostile, despite the threat, and when he lowered the weapon I knew he wouldn't hurt me. He wiped the blood off it and then placed it back into hiding within the walking cane before continuing, "Are you able to stand?"

"Yes, I think so," I murmured. I wasn't injured, but when I tried to stand my legs gave way twice before I succeeded.

He watched me suspiciously, as if he believed I would fall again before he seemed satisfied, "Good. I want to be back before midnight."

We fell into an uncomfortable silence, and I realized then that he still wasn't using his cane to walk. I almost wanted to ask about it but changed my mind, asking instead, "Did you use me as bait?"

"Yes, what of it?"

I suppose that was fair, given that I had been about inclined to shoot him half an hour prior. Of course, I wanted to ask more questions. But couldn't find the right words to form the sentences, and I followed his lead silently as we walked back to the UTV.

We stepped into the office damp from the rain, covered in blood and dirt. Sheriff Barrett looked up from his newspaper and scoffed. "Cover that thing up," he grumbled, obviously referring to Eric's monster arm, as he tossed him a fresh roll of bandages.

Eric caught the roll effortlessly with an amused look on his face.

"Always a warm greeting," he commented as he began to re-wrap his limb.

“Is it alright if I put in my incident report tomorrow?” I asked, exhausted.

“No,” the Sheriff answered gruffly.

“No?” I echoed in disappointment.

“No, I don’t want to see any report on this. I don’t believe in any of that mumbo-jumbo stuff. I don’t want to hear another word on it, actually.”

“What are we supposed to tell the families?” I asked, trying to subdue the irritation in my voice. I risked my life for this assignment, and he was just going to sweep this all under the rug?

“Diane has prepared the report for you. Read it and repeat what it says if anyone asks,” he instructed.

Somehow that didn’t surprise me. I thought back to the few rare cases of massacres in the past. I couldn’t help but wonder if each was a similar situation to the one I had just experienced. It also got me thinking about if, or when, the next time another ‘incident’ would happen. Would I be able to return to my regular duties without thinking about that *thing* out there? About whether or not there were more of them?

It made me anxious; I never imagined I would miss how boring my job used to be. The next time a hiker disappeared, or a campsite was found abandoned, would there be a normal explanation? Or would we be calling Eric Linnaeus? I shuddered at the thought. I didn’t want to see his arm again anytime soon.

As it was, Eric left silently without any of us noticing. He vanished from our little office and melted into the darkness like a ghost. I was relieved when I noticed he had gone, but also slightly guilty.

I realized everyone probably felt that way about him: relieved when he was gone. I couldn’t imagine a man like him would have a warm family to return to; he probably just stayed in hotels or something. It seemed like his line of work, if you can even call it that, would involve a lot of travel. Maybe he would simply move on to the next call for help in facing unexplained phenomena. Even if he used me as bait, he had saved my life and probably the lives of others as well. I should have at least thanked him.

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Chapter 4
A Strange Child and a Stranger Man

Sister Grace: April - December, 1929.

There are none more vulnerable souls than those of the innocent, and so it was that as a young woman, I was sent to St. Katherine's Orphan Asylum on a missionary assignment. The year in which I was sent had been a particularly troubled year. Many crops had failed in the summer, and the winter was no better. It set in with a bitter cold and drew on, long and dark, for months. The economy slowed to a crawl, and families struggled to survive. It’s no wonder that there were so many orphans during this time.

As it were, St. Katherine’s was quite some way out in the country. I think that was done on purpose in hopes that we wouldn’t get quite so many abandoned children. Sadly, the distance helped none at all. They would come walking up the great dirt driveway to our doorsteps with little more than the clothes on their backs.

The home itself was that of a mansion, once owned by a wealthy businessman until his untimely death quite some years prior. It consisted of twelve rooms and ample living spaces. Most of the young ones were well-mannered, and any who were not, were disciplined accordingly by Sister Beatrice. We, like many other orphanages, struggled to feed and clothe all of them. St. Katherine's was at capacity, yet more unfortunates kept arriving.

I wrote to the church several times for help, only to receive no answer. The situation was becoming increasingly desperate when, on an otherwise unassuming day, a shiny black automobile came slowly down our long driveway. It rattled as it went and seemed to bring a shadow across the land. It had thin, white-rimmed tires, the cabin of the thing was large and black curtains blocked off any view one might hope to have of the inside.

The car approached with no particular urgency and rolled to a slow stop with gravel crunching under the wheels. There was a moment of suspense before the fellow who had been driving finally stepped out. He was a most unusual man, beautiful and dressed in fine clothes with plain black rings decorating his fingers. His hair was white, or more rather, a light ash blonde

with blue undertones, while his skin was fair and perfectly unblemished. Beside me, Sister Helen gasped in surprise. Did she know him? He made his way over to us and gave a polite bow.

“I beg your pardon, Sisters. I am Doctor Nathaniel Small from the Dunkel Institute of Psychiatry. Might I speak to the gentleman of this establishment?”

He seemed far too young to be a doctor of any kind, and I thought he must be lying. If I had to guess, I would have said he was only a boy, surely no older than nineteen or twenty. Even so, the refined authority with which he spoke gave me doubt. His voice was smooth, with only a slight accent.

In my distracted speculation, I did not immediately notice his eyes: lime green under long white lashes. I may have been sworn to virtue, but I would be lying if I said my heart didn’t race when I looked into them. I couldn’t be sure if he had the same effect on the other Sisters. Although Sister Beatrice seemed to pay him particularly close attention.

“I am the warden of this orphanage. Whatever your business may be, you will speak with me,” it was Mother Superior Ruth who spoke in a nuanced tone.

“Very well. I have word that your organization is facing some financial difficulties. I have a proposal to remedy that. May we speak in private?” he addressed her directly, and she nodded in agreement. Initially she invited him into the office of the house, but he refused, stating that they should speak in his vehicle instead. Of course, I found this odd. What conversation warranted such secrecy? Manners prevented me from asking, and I wasn’t privy to the discussions.

However, when Mother Ruth left the automobile, she did so by throwing the door open, and herself out. She watched the strange man with malice, her arms folded tight across her chest and her jaw set firm. He returned her expression of contempt with a cold smile and a polite farewell, “When you change your mind and decide to accept my generous offer, you need only send a letter.”

“What did he propose?” I asked the moment his vehicle left. It departed in no more rush than it had arrived with, moving slow and purposeful as it disappeared down the drive.

“He is a man of the devil. No offer he makes is one we can accept,” Mother Superior hissed; she never did elaborate despite my attempts.

After that day, food deliveries became even more unreliable. We received no donations of clothing or money, and it became so urgent that Sister Mary and I had to travel into town personally for supplies. It was an unusual trip. Ordinarily, the townspeople were friendly toward us, but on this day, many shut their doors to our cause. No merchant had anything to sell, and I suspected someone had instructed them not to offer assistance. That night we were only able to serve a single can of beans between all the children.

To make matters worse, the following day Sister Mary ran down the stairs in a fluster, tears streaming down her face. She had found the Mother Superior deceased in her bed. There seemed to be no earthly reason for it. It was merely another misfortune we endured, leaving us isolated and without leadership.

In despair, the remaining five of us gathered to discuss the few options that remained. None were good. We sent Sister Rose away to reach the Church as no letters were arriving, and that was all we could do. The journey would take her some weeks, and it was plain to see that we would need help sooner than that. It was at this time that we turned to Sister Beatrice for guidance, as she was intended to be the next Mother Superior among us, and she wrote to the strange doctor without hesitation.

It became an unspoken agreement that we would not utter a word about it. On the night the cursed letter was sent, one child vanished from our home, and the following morning a wagon of food pulled into our driveway.

This exchange would happen but once a month, on the first Tuesday of each. We began to call the disappearances ‘silent adoptions,’ and I tried not to think about where those who were taken went or what became of them. One thing I was never sure of was how the sacrifices were chosen. Was it at random? Or was Sister Beatrice making the decision? She had always had a brutish nature and violent temper, so I never dared ask.

No matter how it was decided, it did not absolve us of the sin of playing God. We were meddling with fates in which we had no right. I knew it was a mistake, as I’m sure the other Sisters also did, and it was our complacent silence that made us all at fault. The orphanage should have closed, allowing the children an equal chance, no matter how slim. But we were

desperate, and that desperation made us turn a blind eye to that evil man and his increasing demands.

He would stalk the grounds as if he were on a pleasant stroll, speaking and playing with the orphans. Gaining their trust with his disarming nature, laughing and smiling, though the smile never reached his eyes. Then he would approach and suggest something that he wanted to see changed. At first, his requests seemed helpful. He said the children should have better clothing, and so new clothes arrived for them. Not donated clothing riddled with holes and lice as I had come to expect, but rather, brand new clothes well-tailored to each individual child.

He demanded that they be bathed twice daily, for he disliked it when they were ‘unclean’, and it bothered him when they were dirty from playing outside. Next, he ordered that they be fed better. The meal plan became needlessly elaborate and thoroughly planned out. They were to be provided three full meals a day with two snack breaks in between, and we were no longer to feed them watery broth or canned foods. Instead, every meal was a lavish feast: plates piled high with fresh vegetables, fruits, and expensive roasts replaced our usually humble assortment. It seemed to me that we were feeding them almost to excess, and, admittedly, some of the young ones grew plump with this new regiment.

Later, in addition to their grammar, mathematics, and spelling, they were expected to partake in sports training of sorts. These lessons were taught by hand-selected professionals associated with the Doctor, and as a result, most became relatively lean. Personally, I couldn’t see any use in running laps or learning archery, but there was no reason to suspect any of this was untoward. The little ones were healthy, which hardly seemed to be a crime, and so this became our new normal. Regular food wagons, grand new clothing, strange lessons, and stranger still additional staff all bought our silence whenever a child disappeared. After all, one ought not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The day I had been dreading for reasons I can’t fully explain came as fall began. You see, each of us had our favorite orphans and made efforts on their behalf to keep them from the Doctor as best we could. For example, we would ban them from walking outside while he was visiting under the pretense of punishment. While truthfully, it was because we noticed that he

never set foot inside the establishment, and that the children he spent the most time with on his visits were the ones that were most likely to vanish.

It’s far easier to accept the loss of a child that you don’t particularly care for, but there are times when it is hard not to get attached. The child I most cherished was Eric. He was favored among many of us, for he was a beautiful child with a strange allure and polite manner. He had come to us on a thunderous night, and no one noticed him on our doorstep until the evening rounds were completed. By then, he was soaked through, shivering like a leaf. He sat curled over on himself, rain dripped from his dark hair, and his sapphire blue eyes were focused unwaveringly out into the storm. No one knew how, nor when, he had gotten there.

He was only eight years old. With him, he had a backpack, leg brace, and a letter clutched tightly in his hand. This was curious, as most arrived with nothing. Additionally, he wore a silver chain necklace that was far too big for him and would not be separated from it. I assume it was his mother's. He did not speak a word for three days, and the other Sisters feared he was simple. However, I knew this wasn’t the case, for he followed instructions and behaved accordingly. The first time he spoke, it was to ask for a bread roll.

For the majority of the time, Eric was confined to a wheelchair. He was affected by disease, and so when he stood, his left leg needed a brace if he was to walk any distance at all. The others kept away from him, fearing they would catch his illness, and it was because of this that I made an effort to keep him company.

Eric was a bright child and hated being restricted. He was often covered in scrapes and bruises from his escape attempts, and I lost count of the times I found him lying helplessly on the floor after he had tried to walk unassisted. So it shouldn’t have surprised me to find him outside one day, his chair rolled into the grass and stuck.

Unfortunately, I had noticed him too late, and it was with horror that I watched ‘Doctor’ Nathaniel Small cross the yard to speak with him. When I arrived, he had crouched down to be at eye level with Eric, and they were talking casually.

“What are you doing out here?” the man questioned him with curiosity.

“I’m going to climb that tree.” Eric was referring to the tree ahead of him, and I realized his wheels had become tangled as he tried to reach it.

“Oh? You cannot possibly with that leg of yours.” He reminded me of a cat toying with an injured bird.

“What do you know?” the boy responded with a scowl, clearly agitated. This was the attitude he often displayed whenever the other children would tease him.

“Do you truly believe you can do it?”

I interrupted them there, “Doctor, you must forgive me. This is Eric, and his manners are not well refined.” I addressed Small first, then the boy, “And young man, you should be inside.”

Nathaniel’s cat-like eyes shifted to me, and a chill ran down my spine. I knew he was not to be trusted. “That’s quite alright. This one is afflicted?”

“By disease,” I confirmed. Contempt boiled in me for this man and the way he was regarding Eric with such interest.

“He is unable to move his left leg?” I nodded, beginning to wheel Eric away as the man continued, “So why does he believe he can climb a tree?”

“Because he sees others climb it often,” I replied minimally. We were almost at the entryway into the building, and I was worried that he would make an exception and follow us in.

“So he is touched in the head?”

“I’m not touched in the head!” Eric answered, annoyed.

“It is impossible for you. You are too weak,” Nathaniel answered him without any regard for the boy's feelings.

Eric drew a sharp breath as if he were about to argue, and so I warned him, “Do not talk back to your elders,” I was praying he would understand that I didn’t want him to speak any further.

He let out the breath slowly. “I’m not weak,” he whispered so softly I almost couldn’t hear it. I cannot say whether or not the Doctor heard it, for he said nothing more. Instead, he seemed to lose interest and turn away, choosing instead to join an archery lesson in progress with a couple of the older boys.

Relief washed over me as I crossed the threshold inside. The wheels on Eric’s chair clattered over the floorboards, leaving mud that I would later

have to clean, but I didn't mind. "I've told you not to go outside. Why were you out there?" I demanded of him.

"Everyone else is allowed outside. It's not fair…"

"Be that as it may, you must remain inside. And you especially must not speak to that man," I told him firmly. He refused to answer me then, and I knew I had upset him, but that was unavoidable. After all, he was better off unhappy than disappeared.

In the days following, the Doctor spoke to many of the other kids, and my fear that Eric would be taken next began to subside. It is perhaps a show of my true character to say that I was relieved that some other child may be chosen, so long as it wasn't my favorite. However, it was as I sat watching the young ones playing that Small made his way over to me.

"Sister, I don't believe we have been formally introduced. I'm Doctor Nathaniel Small from the Dunkel Institute of Psychiatry. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me on a walk?" he requested.

I smiled politely, as was expected of me, and he offered out a hand in a chivalrous manner as I gathered my skirts to stand. I accepted his assistance with reluctance. His skin was cool to the touch, and I was startled; no living thing should have been that cold. That seemed to entertain him, as if I was the punchline to some kind of private joke with himself.

"Tell me, Sister, the afflicted child; I haven't seen him in the yard of late. Where might he be?"

"We have several with afflictions. Which do you mean?" I questioned, knowing full well whom he was asking after.

"I believe you said his name was Eric. I can't imagine many families would be willing to adopt a child cursed with disease, so I'm sure he's still here."

I began to feel a distinct unease. As far as I knew, he had never before asked about any specific child. "As he is afflicted, he is unable to play outside," I explained shortly, hoping to convey a lack of interest.

"Does he take the same lessons as the others?"

"He is unable to participate in physical activities."

"I see. Nonetheless, I would very much like to speak with him again. Will you arrange it? Or need I speak to Sister Beatrice?" he spoke with an

aloof demeanor, but only a fool would miss the intent behind his words.

“If you want to speak with him, you must do so indoors. The outside world is challenging for him.” I had hoped that setting a meeting inside the house would deter him, and for a second, I believed it had worked, for he hesitated before answering.

“Very well. I will meet with him tomorrow,” he informed me before taking his leave. He was gone with such abruptness that I wondered briefly if he were a street cat in a past life. Then my worries turned to Eric. I had heard that some men prefer little boys to grown women, and it worried me to think that his interest might indicate such a fancy. I failed to imagine at the time that anything could be worse than that, and I was wrong.

I spent the morning of the following day preparing Eric, “Speak only when spoken to, answer questions with as little information as possible, and do **not** go anywhere with him. Do you understand me?” He seldom listened to instructions, but I prayed this time would be different.

“Okay, okay,” he responded with little interest, then asked shyly, “Why does he want to talk to me anyway?”

“I don’t entirely know…” I admitted, “Wait here, and I will get him.”

I nervously adjusted the collar of Eric’s shirt for perhaps the hundredth time before departing to meet Doctor Small. He stood leaning against his spotless black car as if he had been waiting for some time, and I hoped I *had* kept him waiting.

Naturally, I offered a false apology and reluctantly led him into the entryway of the house. I half expected that he wouldn’t follow. Regrettably, he did. Small stepped over the threshold into the house without any hesitance, and I wondered what previous trepidation he may have had.

When we entered, several of the orphans ran to greet him. He was well-received among the other children, and I didn’t want Eric to like him as well. He stopped briefly to offer them a strange, wrapped candy.

“They aren’t allowed confections,” I protested, but he ignored me. Handing out the sweets liberally from his pockets.

“They’re allowed these, just this once,” he smiled at the kids as they pushed each other aside to be the first ones to take the treats.

I was about to argue further when the sound of straining, squeaky metal caught my attention. At the top of the stairs was Eric. He stood proudly supported by a cane and was wearing his metal leg brace.

“You were supposed to wait upstairs!” I exclaimed.

“Why? I can walk,” he stated defiantly. Only the sweat on his brow betrayed the effort it had taken him even to get this far.

“So you can,” Dr. Small acknowledged, waving the others away so that he could approach Eric. “Will you walk with me then, child?”

“He can’t walk long distances,” I interjected, but the man raised a hand as if to silence me.

“He seems eager. Why disturb his mind with such negative notions?”

“I can do it,” Eric insisted.

“Excellent. Perhaps you can show me around the manor?” Nathaniel smiled encouragingly. Children don’t notice when words encourage cruelty and often cannot tell when adults are lying. But I can, and I will never forget the gleam in that man’s eye as Eric struggled to walk. It was torture disguised as a pleasantry.

Of course, I followed after them. Eric navigated with effort through each room, chattering about our daily routines and showing off anything he hoped might be of interest to the man. All the while, Small watched him, analyzing each step he took, waiting eagerly to see if he would fall as the boy struggled to place the cane and heave his stiff leg around.

“Perhaps we should allow him time to rest,” I suggested when we reached the dining room, despite knowing it was an effort in vain. I could see the fire of determination burning in those crystal eyes of his.

“I don’t- need to… rest,” he huffed, breathless from the effort.

“What about me? Perhaps I need a rest?” The Doctor mused, catching both Eric and I by surprise. “Come, let’s sit.”

I pulled out a chair for Eric, and while he was reluctant to take it, I could see he was grateful for the break.

“Might I speak with Eric alone?” It sounded as if he was giving an order and expected to be obeyed.

“You might not.” I denied his request flatly, and he pinched the bridge of his nose with an exasperated sigh.

“I wasn’t asking,” he muttered to himself, then returned his focus to my child, “How is your leg?”

“It’s fine. I can walk more.”

“There’s no need for that. We’ve walked far enough for one day,” he assured, then leaned in closer to whisper in Eric’s ear. It was difficult to determine what was said, but I thought he said, “I can help you, if you have the will for it…”

The surprise on Eric’s face is what convinced me over the years that I was correct in my understanding. “I will come to see you again tomorrow; we’ll talk more about it then,” he sounded bemused as he stood. “I must be going. Sister, I believe another ‘adoption’ will take place tonight. Whom do you believe most ‘deserves’ to be adopted?”

His smug expression made me ill. I couldn’t help but feel he had in some way threatened Eric’s safety, though I tried to keep my tone neutral when I spoke, “I couldn’t say. All children are deserving of loving homes.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he concurred, “I should like to spend some time alone with Eric tomorrow. If that is too difficult, I’ll simply have to adopt him.”

If I had doubted his intention before, I was certain of it now.

“You are welcome to adopt him; every child deserves a good home,” I repeated through my teeth, “However, should you not be ready to make such decisions on a whim, I will, of course, allow for you to see him in private tomorrow.”

With this answer the Doctor seemed satisfied, and I moved to Eric’s side swiftly, placing a hand on his shoulder as if that would somehow deter this man from deciding to take him. I can’t say exactly why it is that I felt so protective of Eric. I only knew that I did not want to see him taken from us.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then,” he spoke directly to Eric before departing.

***

Sleep never came to me that night. I spent it walking the hallways with a lamp in hand, checking in on all the children repeatedly, and especially on Eric. It was never an exact arrangement on when the child would be taken. The other Sisters and I would settle everyone into bed, and in the morning,

without fail, one would be missing. I was determined that it would, at the very least, *not* be Eric.

The floorboards creaked softly under my bare feet as I walked. The hallway clock ticked back and forth rhythmically, and the lantern illuminated the area before me in a weak circle of flickering light. Carefully, I turned each door handle. The metal latches released with a hushed ‘click’ that seemed horrifically loud, but none of the children awoke as I peeked in. Some hours passed this way, and I considered that perhaps no adoption would take place this night after all.

As the hour grew long and nothing seemed out of place, I decided that I would at least try to find some time to rest. I made my final rounds and began to return to my own quarters. This was when I understood that something had changed. The clock had stopped ticking, allowing a heavy silence to settle in the air, and the darkness of the house seemed thicker somehow. It was as if something evil had infiltrated the walls and was leaking poison into the atmosphere. My heart began to race, and I hurried back to Eric’s room. It was not all that much further down the hall and didn’t take me long.

To my relief, he was still sleeping, tucked away safely, just as he was when I last saw him. His bed was the lower bunk of two in the room. Moonlight shone in strongly through the window, glinting off the metal on his leg brace, which was propped beside his bed. I glared long and hard into that room to ensure nothing was out of place before I turned away.

Quietly I shut the door, and as I did, I caught a glimpse of something in the darkness further down the hallway. I held the lamp higher, unsure of what I had seen, and my heart began to thunder. Something was there, “Sister?” I called optimistically to no reply.

“H-have you come to check on the children as well?” I tried. The fear in my voice betrayed my pretense. I knew already that this was no one familiar. It was a dark mass in the shape of a person. An unholy energy swirled around the thing, a gray smoke-like veil that emitted tiny, dim blue sparks. Its facial features were obscured by some kind of skeletal mask so that I could only make out a pair of luminescent eyes reflecting back unnaturally.

I knew for certain it was not human, and as I watched, it held eye contact with me unwaveringly. I could have sworn it was entertained to see

me. Slowly it stepped from one of the rooms and out into the hallway fully, and I could see now that beside it was a girl. She was holding its hand and appeared entirely unafraid. I recognized her to be Latasha, one of the younger children in our care. She looked at me, then up to the thing. I didn't hear it speak, but she answered, "Okay. Goodbye, Sister Grace!" The little girl smiled before walking away with the creature and disappearing into the gloom.

I said a quiet prayer. I was convinced I was in the presence of the devil, and it is my greatest shame that I did not act. Instead, I stood frozen with fear as it led her away. My hands trembled, and I very nearly dropped the lamp. When I at last regained control of my senses, I rushed to the bedroom from which it had come.

Inside, the other children remained soundly asleep. Only the one bed was empty, the bedsheets a tangled mess. After that, I went directly to Sister Beatrice's chambers to demand answers. I was sure that she must have known the price of the deal she had made.

"What becomes of the children who are taken!?" I asked urgently as I barged into her bedroom. Flinging the door to her room open, I was surprised to see she was already awake. Sitting up rigidly straight, her eyes appeared glazed over until she came to focus on me.

"Sister Grace, might I suggest you return to your chambers," she responded coldly, and I took an involuntary step back.

"But Sister, a devil walks our halls; I saw a monster just now-" I was frantic and out of breath.

"Be silent. You will return to your chambers and speak no more of anything you *'thought'* you saw."

"But I-"

"Now!" She barked the word, and I retreated.

Her behavior confirmed my suspicions, and I knew then that I would receive no help from her. She had turned her back on the faith in favor of evil. I remembered then that Sister Beatrice was always somewhat cruel in nature. Often quick to a temper and quicker still to punish any child whom she believed disobeyed her order. Perhaps this was all her doing. Without any other avenue to pursue, I wrote to the church once more, pleading for

help. I sent the letter off with the post that very morning without telling anyone else.

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Chapter 5
Pneumonia

Sister Grace: December, 1929.

At breakfast, Sister Beatrice announced that Latasha had been ‘adopted’. I could feel her gaze on me, willing me to be silent, and I was. I focused instead on fixing children’s clothes, tying shoelaces, and feeding the youngest among them. The decision to ask for outside help without her permission was already made. Now I only had to keep my head down. I began to pray morning and night. In secret, I blessed the hallways, cleansing the air as best I could, not that it seemed to help.

When Doctor Small arrived in his shiny black car I knew he would ask for Eric. For this reason, I allowed the boy outside. I didn’t want them alone together where no one could watch over, so I stayed nearby. They spoke for hours. Eric sat in his wheelchair beneath the big tree, and the man sat on the grass in front of him. It almost looked as if they were old friends, reunited after years, and I couldn’t help but feel sick at that.

He finally left when the children were called inside for lunch, and I approached Eric immediately. “What did he talk with you about?”

“I don’t know, a lot of things.”

It was a vague answer, and I wondered if he was being purposefully unhelpful. “Did he ask you anything… funny?” I struggled to word my question so as not to sound too concerned.

“No? Funny like what? He asked about my leg a lot. He says he can fix it, make me walk again,” he shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, but the hope in his voice gave him away.

“Eric-...” I started, I didn’t know how to explain to him that Nathaniel was a dishonest man, but he interrupted me.

“I know everyone says it’s impossible. He's probably lying, but I don’t care. Maybe I can teach myself to walk again on my own.”

His response caught me by surprise. He was intuitive, and that intelligence was matched only by the determination of his will. I stared at

him dumbfounded, and that's when I noticed the subtle bruising on his arm just below the cuff of his shirt.

With a frown of confusion, I lifted his sleeve to get a better look. It was an angry red bruise in the shape of a hand. I tried to think back to his time with the Doctor, he had never laid a hand on him, and the fingers on the bruise were too small. *Were the other children hurting him?*

"Who grabbed you?" I demanded as Eric pulled away from me sharply.

"No one," he answered a little too quickly, "Can I go eat now?"

He wheeled his chair away from me without waiting for permission, and I allowed him to go.

I had known the others bullied him from time to time, nothing more than mean words, I presumed. That was to be expected, he was the odd one out, and boys will be boys. However, when I took more notice, I began to wonder if things were going too far.

His new clothes would often have scuff marks, and there were a handful of times I overheard the other children mention his name. When I passed by, they quietened down, but I began to suspect they were being too rough with him. Of course, I could never catch them in the act, and Eric refused to speak to me about it.

Eventually, things escalated until one day he appeared with a blackened eye and split lip. When I questioned him about it, he told me he had fallen again while trying to walk. I had my doubts as to how true that was, but there was nothing more I could do if he wouldn't confess what had happened. To my astonishment, I wasn't the only one to notice.

"You're hurt," Nathaniel stated as he came to stand beside Eric's chair.

"I'm fine," he mumbled, looking away, and was subsequently startled when the Doctor reached out to grab his face, tilting his cheek toward the sunlight.

"That hardly looks fine."

"Ow," Eric complained, wincing as he tried to pull away, but the man held him firm as he examined the bruise.

"Care to tell me what happened?"

"Nothing. I just fell! Now let go. You're hurting me."

Small rolled his eyes but did release him, “I’m not hurting you, and I know you’re lying. Tell me the truth of what happened.”

“I just did. I was trying to walk, I fell and hit my face on the handrail of the stairs,” Eric glared back at him.

“Were you going up or down the stairs?”

“Up.”

“It’s hard to get an injury like that falling ‘up’.”

“Then, maybe I was going down them. I don’t remember.”

“If you’re going to lie, at least be consistent.”

“I’m not lying! What do you know anyway?” the boy spat venomously.

“Listen, you little brat, lying to me is like fighting the wind, pointless.”

“I’m not!” he repeated, and Nathaniel seemed frustrated. I don’t know what was stranger; that he allowed Eric to speak to him like that, or how he spoke back.

He hesitated, as if deciding something, before he crouched to be at eye level with Eric and lowered his voice,“ ***Answer me truthfully, Eric. Are you lying to me?*** ” There was something unusual about his tone. Furthermore, could he not tell when he was being lied to by a child?

“…Yes,” Eric answered, seeming shocked himself for admitting it.

“You’re so stubborn for no reason.” Nathaniel sighed, exasperated, as he stood to leave, “I’ll take care of it.”

“Wait! You’re going already?” the boy asked, disappointed.

“Well, since you won’t tell me who’s been hurting you, I have to go find out for myself now, don’t I?” he responded calmly. “After all, it seems your caretakers aren't capable of protecting you the way they should.”

When he spoke, the Doctor looked over in my direction, and I understood that I was the target of his resentment. I’m not sure what he expected. I had done all that I could to catch the culprits. But without Eric’s cooperation, there was nothing more I could do to help him.

***

Months passed and St. Katherine’s continued on without intervention. The shadow creature took more children in ‘silent adoptions’, and still no letters returned. The only good thing that seemed to come of it was that gradually Eric began having fewer 'accidents’ while trying to walk. His bruises healed, and no new ones appeared.

Nathaniel would visit each day and spend great amounts of time with him. They spoke at length, often arguing, and the man would insist Eric try to walk. Occasionally he even encouraged him to participate in the outdoor classes that other children took.

It’s hard to admit, but the boy became decently accurate with a bow. I had previously said that he should not join any of the sports because of his condition. But Small was insistent that he should be treated as any other child would be. In some ways, it was cruel. Eric would never be as capable as the others and watching him fail only opened him up to further ridicule.

But perhaps that was wrong of me to assume that the boy didn’t want to try. After all, Eric was a particularly spirited child. His attitude toward almost anything was one of unwavering determination, even to his detriment. I began to notice after some weeks that he wasn’t sleeping or eating as well as he should have been. This seemed to sour his mood, and he became quicker to anger than he ever was before.

What I mean to say is that Eric was always an angry child. His limitations frustrated him. Families who came to adopt overlooked him because of his additional care requirements, and he wasn’t able to play or run freely with the other children. I believe that, to some extent, he was even angry to be at St. Katherine's. Perhaps he blamed his parents for leaving him behind.

I was beginning to suspect that the Doctor was stoking this flame, encouraging Eric to anger where I would have preached acceptance. Often now, the boy would leave his chair behind in favor of the leg brace only to curse himself when he fell. Until then, I didn’t know he even knew such language. Of course, I tried to speak with him about it, but he refused my attempts regardless of the approach I took. I was certain that Small was teaching Eric bad habits and encouraging an unnatural hatred in him.

***

As winter set in, snow began to fall, and the orphanage, for perhaps the first time, only had a handful of wards left. The holiday season always brings about more adoptions and more donations. Families feel inclined to generosity or more lonely when thinking of family, especially in relation to orphans, and this seemed to have a greater impact on Eric than the others. It highlighted how unwanted he was, I suppose.

And so it was that one day I came downstairs to find Eric missing from the table. My heart stopped for an instant as I tried to remember which day of the month it was. Had he been ‘adopted’ during the night? It wasn’t the right time. It was nearly the middle of December. *It wasn’t possible*; I tried to convince myself as I hurried to check his room.

To further my dismay when I arrived his bed was empty. The sheets were pushed aside carelessly, and his leg brace was gone. True panic set in then, maybe the schedule had changed after all, and he *had* been taken. Frantic, I began to search in earnest, calling his name as I made haste back through the halls. It was only by chance that I caught a glimpse of something through the window and stopped in my tracks to peer out.

In the early morning, the yard was still, a fine layer of snow had settled over the ground during the night, and songbirds sang carefree. Laying at the base of the tree was a familiar brace covered entirely in ice, and nestled high in the branches was Eric. He appeared to be at least half asleep, and I rushed out to him. I couldn’t imagine how long he must’ve been out there.

I had to make use of a ladder, and when I reached him, he was cold to the touch. His lips were pale, and ice crystals coated his eyelashes. I realized then that he wasn’t merely sleeping; he was shivering violently and nearly unconscious.

“Eric. Eric, wake up.” I shook him perhaps a little too firmly, and his eyes fluttered open.

“Tell… Nathaniel, he was wrong- I did it…” he murmured quietly.

“Never mind about him now. Foolish child,” I scolded, while in truth, I was relieved. I had only wrapped him in my coat as I carried him inside, but the color was already returning to his cheeks. It seemed he hadn’t been outside as long as I had first feared.

I placed him in front of the fire, wrapped him in blankets, and prepared him a warm beverage. “Drink slowly,” I warned. “What in the heavens were

you doing out there?”

“Climbing…” he answered meekly. “I’ve been practicing every night. I knew I would get it.”

There was nothing to say. He was a fool to risk hypothermia for such a pointless endeavor, and if I hadn’t personally seen him in the tree, I would never have believed a crippled boy could do it. I remembered all the times he had tried to walk with the brace instead of using the chair. Perhaps this was something I should have foreseen and prevented, for it seemed being in the cold did the boy no favors.

Initially, I had taken his rapid recovery to be a good sign and had not considered there could be other complications. Unfortunately, however, Eric soon fell ill, and the sickness took its toll. By the week’s end I had called in a local doctor to tend to him.

Eric had influenza, and by the time he was able to be seen, it had developed into pneumonia. I was told the prognosis was severe. He was unlikely to survive. I stayed by his side for days, listening as his breathing deteriorated. His little breaths became ragged and labored. He coughed night and day, sometimes spitting up unsavory chunks of phlegm. I knew then that he would undoubtedly die. Nonetheless, I did my best to remain positive for his sake.

To make matters worse, in all this time, Nathaniel never did show. He had visited almost every day since meeting Eric. But now that the boy had gone to such lengths to prove his worth, and fallen ill because of it, *Nathaniel Small* failed to arrive. Eric asked after him every day. He wanted to boast of his success and insisted that he was strong. Although I also got the feeling that he simply missed his friend as well.

It was Christmas Eve when Doctor Small’s vehicle next pulled into our driveway, obnoxious and loud. I left Eric and stormed outside. “You vile, devil-worshiping, swine!” I spat venomously while moving to slap him.

Unfortunately, he caught my hand before I made contact, and an expression of genuine amusement crossed his smug face.

“Now, Sister, there’s no need for name-calling. Tell me, where is Eric?” he asked, recovering annoyingly quick.

“Inside. Dying because of you,” I snapped as I wrenched my hand free of his grip.

“Because of me? Pray tell, what *exactly* do you believe I’ve done to him?” he asked, exasperated.

“He climbed that damned tree in the middle of the night and now will die of pneumonia.”

He shrugged, “And did he manage to climb it?”

I wanted to lie to give him no satisfaction. “He did. Despite whatever hateful doubts you fed him.”

“Interesting,” he smiled, then, without invitation, proceeded to enter the house.

Taken aback by his presumption that he was allowed in, I followed after him, peeved. “You cannot just-” I began but stopped as we reached Eric’s room.

I hadn’t expected him to know where Eric was since we had to move him into isolation to keep the other children from becoming sick. Despite this, the man made no mistake in his direction, and when we entered the room, Eric looked even frailer than he had when I left. Each time he coughed it seemed to come right from his toes and rattle his entire skeleton. I turned to scold the Doctor again but stopped as I noticed he stood as still as stone.

His expression was odd. No longer the arrogant, superior man I had come to know. Instead, he wore no expression at all, his emotions carefully guarded. “Eric,” he spoke with authority, and the boy opened his eyes.

“… I did it…” Eric responded with shallow breaths as he tried to sit up, only to be pushed back down immediately.

“Don’t move,” Nathaniel instructed as he placed his fingertips on Eric’s chest for a brief moment. In that instance, I thought-… I thought I saw a glow. Of course, I can’t be certain, it was very quick, perhaps a glint of light from the window, but the child coughed violently immediately after.

“What did you do to him?!” I accused, but he ignored me, continuing as if nothing had happened.

“You need to rest. I heard you climbed the tree. So what are you doing now? You plan to die here?” he muttered, and the tiniest spark of rage ignited in the orphan’s eyes. “Poor little cripple. Too weak to combat an illness such as this? How disappointing.”

He spoke bluntly, and when he turned to leave, Eric struggled to sit up again while I stood speechless. Of all the things I had possibly expected him to say, that was, most definitely, not it. He walked past me without a word back to his car, and once I recovered from my own disbelief, I hurried after him.

“Now, wait just a minute! You need to go back and apologize to that boy *Right Now!*” I shouted, flustered.

“There’s no point. I’m too late; he will be dead by morning.”

His cold tone only fueled my rage. “And you want those to be the last words he hears?” I challenged him.

At this he stopped, annoyed, and turned back to face me. I realized then that a deep rage burned in his eyes. It was almost as if he was angry at Eric for falling ill. Did he blame the boy for dying?

“The last words a dead child hears are of no consequence. There’s nothing more that can be done for him, but if he has the will for it and lives through the night, they won’t be the last words he hears. Don’t you agree?” he snapped back, and I was surprised to find myself afraid.

“You are a godless, foul man,” I stated in a low tone.

“Is that so? And just what has ‘God’ ever done for you? Why don’t you write another letter to the church to complain? See how far it gets,” He retorted and, to my surprise, pulled a letter from his coat which he tossed back at me. It fell to the ground as he got into his vehicle, and I stared at it, dumbfounded, as he drove off. I recognized the handwriting on the envelope; it was my own print. This was the very letter I had sent to the church the night I had first seen the shadow.

I understood a great many things in that moment. The church had never responded because they had never gotten any word from us. Our establishment was cursed from the first day the Doctor darkened our doorways. I wondered how far his influence reached. Had he stopped townsfolk from trading with us? Had he forced Sister Beatrice’s hand in agreeing to his proposal?

After picking up the letter and gathering my thoughts, I returned to Eric’s side to find his fever had worsened. Looking at him it was plain to see that he was in pain; his skin was clammy, and he shivered still despite being warm to the touch. I knew then that the Doctor was correct. Eric

wouldn’t survive the night. For hours I sat with him, dabbing his forehead, and praying in vain for his recovery.

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Chapter 6
The Devil’s Work is Never Done

Sister Grace: January - February, 1930.

It was quite some time before the ‘Doctor’ returned to St. Katherine’s Orphanage. The children waited outside every morning for that black vehicle to come rolling down the driveway with its unconventional white wheels and strange driver, and each morning they returned to their lessons disappointed. The first Tuesday in January came and passed, but no silent adoption took place that month. I joked bitterly with myself that even shadow demons took the holiday season off.

On the day of the funeral, we dressed all the children for the occasion and took the bus to the chapel. So it was much to my surprise that when we arrived, Nathaniel Small was already there. The blasphemy that he should look alike to an angel was insurmountable. He was dressed entirely in black, and the dark colors created an unearthly contrast against his light hair and bright eyes. His expression was diplomatically blank, and he paid no mind to me.

I don’t know who told him of the funeral, nor could I see any reason he should attend. Sister Helen was the eldest of us. She had passed in her sleep quite naturally, and, as far as I was aware, he didn’t even know her. However, when Sister Mary wheeled Eric off the bus I understood.

“I can do it myself,” the child muttered annoyed, folding his arms in protest. As always, he had wanted to walk, but Sister Mary didn’t want him falling over during the service and insisted he use the chair. She scolded him lightly for his attitude as she pushed him into the hall.

Nathaniel froze in place as he watched, and the emotions played out clearly across his face: disbelief, astonishment, relief, and then finally, *anger* as his gaze came to rest on me. Hatred lived there, and I realized he must have assumed I had kept news of the boy’s survival from him.

Admittedly, I hadn’t exactly rushed to tell him, and Eric had recovered astonishingly well. I had expected that it would take some time for him to recover fully, or that he might still cough on occasion. Instead, he seemed

healthier than ever. Still, it wasn't *my* fault Small had shown up, uninvited, mind you, to a funeral with the assumption that it was for Eric. I wondered briefly if he might leave now that he knew it wasn't? Unfortunately, that was not the case. He made his way into the church after Eric, and I waited with bated breath to see if he would spontaneously combust on the holy ground or not. Regrettably, he did not. Rather he sat comfortably and quietly for the duration of the wake and service.

Once it was over and done with, we began loading the children back onto the bus, and this is when Small approached. "The boy survived," he commented, falling into pace with me.

"Yes," I answered simply.

As I recalled, I had awoken with a start the morning following his last visit, and I fully expected that Eric would be dead. I had fallen asleep against his bedside during the night and initially hesitated to check on him. I didn't want to look up to see his corpse, so I had allowed myself a moment to remain purposefully unaware. I imagined that I could still hear him drawing labored breaths… and slowly, I came to realize that I *could* hear him still breathing peacefully. He was alive. It was a miracle, I was sure.

"You neglected to write that he recovered."

"And you neglected to instruct me to do so," I retorted.

He smiled at this, a cynical, annoyed smile. "I see. In that case, I won't neglect to inform you that I will be escorting Eric back to St. Katherine's in my vehicle today."

"His chair won't fit in your transport," I came up with the excuse quickly.

"He won't need his chair; he will be seated," he responded in finality, and so it came to pass that Eric was placed into his car. They drove ahead of us the entire way, and I watched anxiously. If he chose to do so, all he need do was turn off at any point, and I would never see Eric again.

When we arrived, I rushed off the bus while the Doctor helped Eric out of the car and into his leg brace. They were still talking as I approached, and I overheard some of their conversation.

"Why can't you fix me right now?" Eric was asking, sounding impatient but looking slightly queasy. I wondered if the car had given him travel

sickness.

Nathaniel looked amused. “Contracts take a toll, and you have to fulfill your end of the deal first.”

“I can do that. I-”

“We will talk about this another time,” he interrupted the boy as I reached them. Initially, Eric looked as though he were about to protest further, but then he noticed me and understood. Whatever they were speaking of was a secret I wasn’t supposed to know.

“Don’t stop on my account,” I assured bitterly.

“Whatever gave you the impression I would ever do anything on your account?” he asked, bemused. “I simply have to go. Other matters to attend to.”

Annoyance washed over me, but I held my tongue, focusing my attention on Eric instead to assist him inside. “I don’t need help,” he complained, though not strongly enough to stop me from helping him walk inside as the man left.

Now, of course, the moment we were in private, I asked if Small had hurt him in any way during their time alone.

“No?” Eric responded with such confusion that I couldn’t help but believe him. I began to feel that whatever had happened, or not happened; I was significantly wrong about what it was.

“Well, what did you talk about then?” I inquired, utterly thrown by his bewilderment.

At this, Eric paused. It was as if he was deciding what he should, or was allowed to, say. “He didn’t say much to me, but I asked him if he would adopt me, and he said no… Why do you think he doesn’t want me?”

That surprised me, and I didn’t know what to say. Truthfully, I didn’t know why Nathaniel showed such interest in Eric but hearing that he didn’t want to adopt him was somewhat of a relief. “Do you want him to?” I asked instead.

At this, Eric pulled a face, “You can’t answer a question with another question.”

“I can do what I like. I’m an adult,” I reminded him indignantly, folding my arms.

A long moment of silence passed between us as we both refused to back down before Eric finally gave in. “I don’t know… I don’t even know if I want to be adopted at all.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I’m not an orphan, I don’t need adopting.”

My heart broke. He was too young to understand his parents had left him, and it’s rarely, if ever, that parents come back for the children they had given up. But I couldn’t tell him that either. “Do you think about your family often?”

“Sometimes… Nathaniel asked me about them before. If I remembered them, if I knew where they were…” he murmured.

“And what did you tell him?”

He stopped then, his expression something between anger and hurt, “Nothing. I didn’t want to talk about them with him, and I don’t want to talk about it with *you* either.”

“… Perhaps you should go wash up for dinner now,” I tried to soothe him.

The boy wheeled himself away with attitude; it was plain to see the pain he carried with him. I had no doubts that he could remember his parents, he had been with us just shy of a year by then, and he was a bright child. From then on, he seemed... different. More withdrawn, often on my night rounds, I would find him awake late into the night. He sat staring out his bedroom window, and when I asked what he was doing, he responded that he wasn’t doing anything, just that he couldn’t sleep.

He remained in this state for days, and I struggled to find anything that could cheer him up. I found myself thinking more often about Eric’s parents. Previously I had assumed he was left in our care because they had faced some hardship in which they could no longer care for him. By chance, I remembered that Eric had arrived with a letter.

At the time, Mother Superior Ruth had been the only one to read it before it was filed away, and now I wondered what exactly it could have said. I knew it would be kept in the office, as this is where all paperwork was filed for each child, and so I decided that I would find it. Perhaps it would shed some light on Eric’s past.

I waited until nightfall, and then some considerable time after that, to ensure that the house was quiet. Once I was confident, I crept downstairs into the office without lighting a lamp. It was a hazardous venture; I stubbed my toe on the banister in the darkness and nearly gave myself away. Fortunately, I managed to keep the pain contained as I continued.

The office was never locked, the door swung inward silently, and I made an effort to close it just as quietly. The inside of the room was entirely black, and unease settled into my bones. There's something profoundly uncomfortable about standing alone in an entirely dark space. For every second that there is no light, one imagines something may be creeping up on you. I could hardly stand the sensation. I fumbled for the matches I had brought and hastily lit a candle. I needed the light anyway if I had any hopes of finding the letter.

Setting the lamp aside, I began to search the shelves for Eric's intake information. You see, the office was a small room, no more than a desk and bookshelves, frankly. The shelves were where all paperwork was filed. None of it was arranged alphabetically, nor in any logical way as far as I could discern. It almost looked as if someone else before me had rummaged through it recently.

As I searched, I feared I would be caught at any moment, and even the smallest of sounds made me uneasy. On several occasions I paused anxiously to listen, before continuing my search in frustration. It must've taken me nearly an hour to find Eric's file, slim as it was, tucked away among several other near identical-looking documents.

It contained papers that stated the day, time, and condition in which he came into care at St. Katherine's, as well as papers pertaining to his medical history. Because of this, the letter was easily noticeable among the other documents. It was unaddressed, water stains had wrinkled the paper, and it was yellowed with age. However, upon opening the envelope, a heavy disappointment set in. The letter was missing. Someone had taken it, I was sure.

***

In the following days, Dr. Small returned to his regular visiting schedule, and Eric's spirits continued to decline. He began to fall asleep frequently

during his lessons, and as a result, Sister Beatrice struck him with the back of a ruler so hard that it cut his knuckles. I was shocked to hear of this and more surprised still to hear of Eric's reaction. He hadn't cried as most children would. Instead, he glared back, unflinching, and uttered the words, "If someone has to die so that I can walk again, I'm going to make sure it's you."

This wasn't the first time Sister Beatrice had used such methods against the children, although it was rare that any returned the malice. I began to worry that the hatred Nathaniel spread had once again infected my child. For the time that he had been absent, Eric had returned to a sweeter nature. Now that the man visited him again daily, his mood was foul, and the punishments Sister Beatrice imposed for his outburst didn't help the situation.

Nowadays, there are many occasions that I lay awake thinking of Eric. About his change in behavior, how the transformation of his nature came to be, and the way in which anger seemed to consume him, little by little, until there was almost nothing of him left. And many nights still that I wonder what drove him to what he did.

There had been some unpleasantries in his life, certainly. The other children teased him, and there were times when they would steal his brace. But that had largely stopped since the day Small spoke to him about his black eye, and I was sure I always found out before any real harm came to him previously. Or maybe I didn't. Perhaps Sister Beatrice was too hard on him with her punishments… I can't say for sure which specific thing pushed him too far.

I only know that the night it happened is one I wish I could forget. It was around 3 a.m. that I awoke suddenly from my sleep, the decorative clock on my bedroom wall was frozen in place, and I couldn't say what it was that woke me. Regardless I quickly became aware that smoke filled the air. It swirled in the dim light coming in from outside, and the bitter smell of it burned my throat.

Panicked, I leaped up and pulled on a robe as I hurried to wake the others. I ran down the hallway shouting for everyone to wake. I opened every door along the way, urging sleepy children to climb from their beds and make haste out of the house. Then I rushed to Eric's room, only to find that he was not in bed. The other children in his room were there and

starting to wake with varying levels of concern in their expressions, but my child was missing!

Working as quickly as I could, I ushered many children out of that burning house. Each time I ran back in, the smoke was thicker. I kept a cloth over my face to keep the fumes out, but I was gasping for breath before long. Urgently, I tried to find Eric. Flames were beginning to flicker at the far end of the hall, and there wasn't much time left.

I had it in my mind that he must have somehow fallen somewhere and was unable to escape, so I continued to search frantically. Eventually, I reached the last door. It was Sister Beatrice's room, and while I couldn't think of any reason he should be in there, I needed to be sure. The door was slightly ajar, and fire licked the edges of the frame while thick smoke traveled across the ceiling. "Eric? Sister Beatrice?" I called, pushing the door open. The fire danced wildly with the new oxygen, and I took in the scene before me in shock.

Eric stood in the room beside the open window. He was relying heavily on his brace, and I believe he was planning to jump out. He looked up in surprise when I entered. His clothes and hands were covered in blood, and Sister Beatrice lay lifeless on the bed with a kitchen knife plunged through her heart. The odor of cooking human flesh filled the air as the body began to burn. It was disturbing in an odd way. It smells a lot like any other meat; only you feel strange knowing that the meat is someone you once knew.

It's difficult to describe the ways in which your mind tries to stretch all the facts to fit and make sense. I couldn't quite comprehend what I was seeing. It was impossible. He was too sweet, moreover, too frail to have been able to do this; my mind raced. Yet there he was in the room, holding a candle and covered in blood. Sister Beatrice was dead, and the curtains beside him seemed to be completely burned away. *Had he stabbed her to death and set the curtains alight to cover his tracks?*

We stared at each other in pure astonishment for a long moment, before his gaze slowly moved across to Sister Beatrice's body. He then looked down at the candle in his hands, and finally back to me. I could tell he was connecting the same dots I had, and I recalled his outburst days earlier. *'If someone has to die so that I can walk…'* he had said, and I wondered if he remembered his statement as well.

“Sister, I didn’t-!” he started, eyes wide with shock, when a support beam from the ceiling gave way. It came crashing down into the room between us in a fantastic spray of sparks, eliminating any hopes of reaching him.

“ERIC!” I yelled in panic. There was no way for me to get into the room, and it was with reluctance that I turned to leave. I had intended to run for help, though I couldn’t imagine who could help me at this hour. Part of me knew it was a lost cause, while another part still hoped he would leap from the window.

I ran outside; the air was cold and stung my damaged lungs. At that point, I intended to run to the other side of the home and urge Eric to jump from the window. I would catch him. That’s when the familiar black car came screaming up the driveway. It pulled to a sudden stop, with the back end sliding out and gravel spraying in all directions.

“Eric’s still inside-” I tried to explain rapidly as the Doctor stepped out of the car. I didn’t want to ask this man for help, and I didn’t truly get the chance, for he went straight past and into the building without acknowledging me.

He moved quickly yet without any particular urgency as he cast his long coat aside and trotted up the stairs into the inferno, as if the house weren’t on fire at all. The flames fluttered around him as he disappeared, and I waited anxiously with the other Sisters and the children.

It was hard work to calm everyone down. In the background, fire sirens blared above the roar of the fire and marked the approach of emergency workers. But I doubted they would be able to do much as the mansion was, by this time, completely engulfed in flame.

Seconds stretched into minutes, and there was still no sign of either Nathaniel or Eric. A scream erupted from my chest when another portion of the house collapsed. There's agony in being completely helpless, knowing someone you love is dead or dying, and there’s nothing at all you can do to help. In my heart of hearts, I knew that Eric was already gone from the moment the ceiling collapsed. Tears welled in my eyes as the truth set in. No one could survive such a fire.

Because of this, I saw it through a watery haze when a figure finally re-emerged from the smoke. I recognized it was Nathaniel, and in his arms, he

carried Eric bundled close to him. He stepped out of the flames onto scorched earth calmly, his clothes were singed, and there were small burns on his skin. Eric, however, seemed remarkably unharmed. He was covered in grime and appeared listless, but at least he was alive. I don't know why I had expected that Small would carry the boy back to me. Rather, I had never considered that he *wouldn't*. So it was much to my dismay when he took Eric to his car instead and placed him in the back seat.

"What are you doing? You can't take him!" I interjected, stepping in his way to prevent him from shutting the car door.

"No? You expect that he will stay here?" Dr. Small asked flatly. "St. Katherine's is finished, and this establishment is released from its contractual obligations. Eric is the final child I shall take."

His statement caught me off guard; I didn't fully understand it. Although, I expect Sister Beatrice might have understood better. "You are not going to take him," I repeated, ignoring all else he had said.

He laughed humorlessly. "Stand aside, or *two* nuns will be murdered on this night."

I stood my ground, and I could tell he was losing patience. His eyes seemed to glow against the backlight of the burning mansion, and his expression was one of distaste. "You are a fool if you believe I will simply allow you to take him."

"Tell me, if he stays, what fate do you expect for a child accused of murder?" he snapped. "Without my assistance, Eric would have burned to nothing. He is mine now. He will be well cared for, and he will achieve things greater than you could ever hope to imagine. Now, if you would be so kind as to ***move*** ."

I heard the word as an instruction and stood to the side involuntarily. It was a horrible feeling, as if someone had reached inside and forced me to move. The shock of it left me breathless, and the motion sickness that came after hit hard. I hadn't before, nor have I ever since, experienced anything like it in all my years.

It was a magic of sorts, I'm sure. Once I was out of the way, he closed the car door and moved to the driver's side without saying another word. Then they drove away. The black car seemed to melt into the night and vanish mere moments before the fire trucks arrived.

That was the last time I saw Eric Linnaeus, but I'll never forget his expression. It was lifeless. He sat perfectly still in that back seat, he did not attempt to escape, and there was no spark in him. No anger, no fear. Nothing. It was like looking into a void. I relinquished my faith that day, for I witnessed many things brought on by the work of a devil, and the 'God' I worshiped never once helped. I try not to think about Eric anymore, but it's difficult for me not to wonder about whatever became of him. Perhaps when I pass, I will meet with him again, and he will be able to tell me.

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Chapter 7
Oklahoma is Worse than Maine

Charles Walsh: September, 1998.

It was a slow Tuesday at the county Sheriff's Office in Maine. I mean, *most* days at my job were slow. The most exciting thing to happen all year was back in May, and by exciting, I mean horrific. That all seemed forgotten now, and with the days growing colder, hiking season was wrapping up. Time crawled by as I sat at my desk working on a report when my boss, Sheriff Barrett, looked up from his newspaper with an odd expression.

His furry brows knitted together as he asked, "Say, Charles. Do you like lakes?"

"You mean the Lakers?" I asked skeptically.

"No, boy. I mean lakes. You know, big bodies of water. Lakes," he reiterated gruffly.

"I- I.." I struggled to formulate an intelligent answer; why was he asking me about lakes? That made even less sense.

"Well, do you, or don't you?" the man asked again impatiently.

"Yeah, yes, I guess so?" I could hear the doubt in my voice. "Why's that?"

Barrett seemed to think for a moment. His gaze focused on me, and he seemed far away in thought. I got the feeling that there was something he wasn't telling me.

"You did such a good job with that issue earlier this year that I'm sending you to Oklahoma for some more training. They've got an excellent water safety program," he slammed his newspaper down and stood up. "I'll start making the arrangements. Warden Gregory will be happy to have you, I'm sure."

And just like that, the decision was made for me. I barely had any say in the matter, not that I had any protests anyway. It was a great opportunity to

do some paid traveling on company time, and I hadn't been to Oklahoma before.

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I arrived on Thursday the following week. It was awkward trying to navigate on my own. I wasn't entirely sure where I was going, and the hand-drawn map Sheriff Barrett sent me with was considerably outdated. In the end, I asked some locals for directions to the game warden's office, and that got me there.

The building was located near the entrance of a large recreational park and had the words '*Wildlife Management Center*' written on the side, not unlike my usual workplace. Only, there was no café back home, and the parking lot was a muddy bog at best, while this one was clean asphalt all the way up to the entrance. That felt like a luxury in itself.

Nervously, I walked up to the front desk, and the lady sitting there eyed me with suspicion. She definitely wasn't as friendly as Diane. It was like being a kid again on his first day of school. "Hi, I'm Charles, Charles Walsh. I was sent down from Maine?" I offered over my credentials and hoped she would have gotten word before my arrival.

The woman gave my badge a cursory glance but said nothing, and so I stood awkwardly, waiting like a floundering fish until she eventually spoke, "Go through. The warden's office is the second on the right."

"Thanks," I said politely. She didn't acknowledge that I had spoken as she returned her attention to some paperwork without another word. So much for Southern hospitality.

I reached the second door as directed and wavered, trying to decide whether or not to knock. I had just made the decision to do so when it opened, and a tall older man stepped out. He was startled to see me and looked me up and down suspiciously.

"You the guy from Maine?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm Charles, are you warden Gregory?" I hoped.

The man laughed. "Gregory? No. That useless bastard retired a few years back," he explained, "I'm Devin. Good to meet you," the man shook my hand with an uncomfortably firm grip.

It took me a second to recover. I was sure that Sheriff Barrett had said Gregory was warden. *Perhaps his information on who was in charge was just as outdated as his map*, I thought bitterly.

“Come. I’ll show you around,” Devin said, slapping a big hand on my shoulder. He smelled strongly of cigars, but his upbeat attitude was reassuring. He toured me around the building first, showing me where the amenities were before we made our way out into the reserve.

We went past the ‘wildlife management area’ sign at the park's entry, then continued down a short dirt path past the lake. Along the way, he mentioned that the trail went toward their most popular camping site and eventually met back up with the road to the office. Admittedly, I wasn’t paying as much attention to what he was saying as I should have been. The park was breathtakingly beautiful, well-maintained, with no trash in sight and few guests. Sunlight shimmered off the lake's surface, birds fluttered about without a care in every tree, and the forest was a rich green.

Of course, the land was far flatter than I was used to. The reserve I worked at normally overlapped part of the Appalachian Mountains, and all the trails weaved uphill eventually with varying degrees of steepness. However, despite the beauty of the lake, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy looking out at it. Past the sky’s reflection on the water, I could see it was a murky brown, and it was impossible to see anything that might be lurking below.

The first few days after that were spent on orientation, which meant paperwork mostly. I was supposed to stay for about four weeks, so I had a lot to learn about water safety in only a short time. At the end of every day I found myself worn out. I was staying at a hotel in a bare room with a window view into the forest. Each night I would collapse into bed and pray for the creatures outside to be quiet enough that I could sleep uninterrupted until morning.

So when the call came in at 4:34 a.m. on my first day off, I was less than impressed. The phone was right beside the bed and blaringly loud. Initially, I was tempted to roll over and block out the sound with a pillow, but I knew I should probably answer it.

With extreme reluctance I reached clumsily for the receiver, nearly dropping it, and just barely catching it by the cord to bring it to my ear. “Hello, Deputy Charles speaking,” I answered gruffly, not ready to talk with

anyone so early in the day. It was Warden Devin on the other end, and I was in no way prepared for what I was hearing. I slammed the phone down and scrambled out of bed, almost tripping over the sheets in my haste. I left the room moments later without even the opportunity to make a coffee.

I arrived at the scene within the hour. Driving down the dirt track to the lake, I could see emergency lights ahead flashing intermittently through the forest, bathing the area in red and blue hues. The first responders had arrived before I had, and their vehicles were parked along the edge of the lake. A crime scene barrier had been established, the black and yellow tape twisted gently in the wind as it stretched between the trees.

When I pulled up, Devin, accompanied by two officers I didn't recognize, approached my vehicle. "Charles," Devin greeted me as I rolled the window down. "I hope you haven't eaten breakfast."

"That bad?" I asked skeptically. Truthfully, I doubted anything could unsettle me after the May incident back home. However, the glance the other officers exchanged told me that something was amiss. "Did someone drown?"

This time, the man beside Devin spoke up. "It's a bit… unnatural. Just like the ones a couple of weeks ago…" he said slowly, gesturing for me to follow them.

Mildly intrigued, I got out of my truck and trailed after the officers. Naturally, I was expecting that we would head toward the lake. However, they led me into the woods instead. On our way, others moved around us, some standing around uncertainly, others taking photos. Media coverage had already arrived, but they were kept back behind the barrier.

The officers stopped at a clearing and motioned for Devin and I to go ahead. The first thing I noticed was that the area was wet. It hadn't rained in the time I had been there, yet the ground squelched beneath my boots. The scene was lit by headlights, and I saw immediately what all the fuss was about. Slumped at the base of a large cypress tree were two bodies. They were crumpled together, and it looked like they were clambering over each other to escape something, only the tree had somehow gotten in their way.

They were barely recognizable as human. The bodies were bloated with water leaking out from the pores of their skin, mouths, and eyes, creating a puddle of water around them that saturated the ground. My initial

assumption was that they had drowned and been dragged out of the water, but if that were the case, shouldn’t the water have dried up? This looked more like the water had come out of them, and was still welling up, as if they themselves were a newly formed natural spring. I realized then that I was standing in their fluids.

That alone nearly made me heave, and I subtly stepped quicker to get out of the wet patch to dry land. However, in addition to the grotesque state of the bodies was the smell. It was not something I would have expected. Not the scent of decaying flesh, but rather an extremely pungent, musky, rotting smell that assaulted my nostrils. Like algae baking in the sun.

I gagged, backing away further in disgust. One of the officers offered me some peppermint rub to put under my nose and I took it gladly. “What the hell happened to them?” I asked as I tried not to dry heave.

“Don’t know. Can’t think of any way anyone could end up like that. We’ll send them off to the coroners for an autopsy, but we're recommending the park be closed to visitors for a few days,” the officer explained.

Devin nodded in agreement as he spoke up, “Sure thing. I doubt anyone will want to come here now anyway. Tabloids are calling us ‘Murder Reserve’.”

Honestly, I couldn’t wait to be out of there. I had never seen, or *smelled*, anything like it before.

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In the days that followed, the park remained closed to visitors as promised, but Devin and I still patrolled the regular route. He explained to me that sometimes kids or unlicensed hunters would sneak in, and if they did that regularly when the park was open, they certainly weren’t going to let a park closure stop them. However, because the park forest stretched over miles, it was hard to patrol every inch of it at all times.

It was for this reason that we split up. Devin sent me out on one trail while he patrolled another. We would cover more ground this way, and he assured me that I couldn’t get lost if I just ‘stayed on the trail’. I understood then how tourists felt when I sent them out with those exact same words - skeptical.

Despite this, I set out with confidence. I was trained to navigate the wilderness, highly skilled. *How lost could I get?*

Now, I'm sure you can imagine my surprise when my ATV made a disappointing choked sound and slowly puttered to a stop with smoke billowing out the engine. The sun was by then falling toward the horizon, and I was **not** pleased. I was at least a good five miles out over rough terrain. That meant it was going to take me a solid couple of hours to walk back. It would be dark by then, without a doubt. Usually, that wouldn't have bothered me. It wasn't the first time I would have traveled alone in the dark.

However, in light of the recent events, and being in an unfamiliar area, I was more apprehensive about the situation. If nothing else, I was in bobcat territory. I began the trek back with my Remington close at hand and cursing Devin for his poorly maintained equipment. For the most part, I walked on the trail for two reasons. One, it's a lot easier to walk over semi-flat ground than fight your way through the forest. And two, I was hoping Devin might come out looking for me when I wasn't back when I was supposed to be.

Around me, I could hear creatures in the trees, birds mostly, I told myself. But I imagine some were small rodents scurrying about. Overall, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, but even so, when the track met up with the far edge of the lake to run parallel alongside it, I became uncomfortable.

I remembered the water trickling from those bodies. I imagined it seeping under leaves on the ground, raising them up slightly as it twisted through the dirt and around small rocks. It would travel tirelessly, carving out the land to return to its destination: The Lake. That idea made me feel distinctly uneasy. I don't recall what brought me back from my thoughts, but it was then that I noticed something in the atmosphere had changed.

The woods were quiet. Far quieter than a forest at dusk should have ever been. Looking around, however, I saw nothing, and that made me nervous. It was slowly growing darker, and I loaded my firearm, just in case. I wasn't far from the ranger's station, which was moderately comforting. There would be people there, warmth, and light. All the things we tell ourselves will keep us safe.

Beside me, the lake was an inky black and lined with the silhouettes of trees against the dim sky. Dark ripples moved slowly across the water's

surface, and I found myself frozen to the spot. I couldn't tell if the movement was purposeful or if a breeze had blown over, making the small waves. I tried to convince myself that it was the latter, that paranoia had taken hold. But as I stood waiting, something crossed the path up ahead.

The worst scenarios played out in my mind, and I had trouble identifying the thing at first. My imagination wanted to twist the creature into something monstrous. I had been having nightmares since May, and some part of my brain was convinced that it was happening again. However, as I fought back the terror, I came to realize that it was nothing more than a deer approaching the lake. It hadn't noticed me, and as I watched, the doe delicately tiptoed to the water's edge.

A soft, nervous, laugh escaped me as I recounted how terrified I had been of a deer. That's when I noticed that there was something in the water only a few feet out. I couldn't see more than a dark outline, but it looked like a person's head was popping up out of the water. Confused, I stared at it as it moved closer to the shore.

The deer seemed to notice it then too. Her ears pricked forward with interest at first, and she stepped back. Staring at the water with just as much shock as I was, before letting out an alarm call. The sound rang out clear and loud into the night air, but the thing in the water didn't react.

When it didn't move, the doe didn't either. They watched each other for a long moment more, then a strand of water snaked its way up from the lake. With *blink-and-you'll-miss-it* speed, the water struck the deer. The animal flew backward in a panicked state and darted away into the forest.

I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed. When I regained myself enough, I looked back to the lake. The figure was gone. It dawned on me then that whatever it was had just missed its prey, which meant it would more than likely move on to the next thing nearest the water. Which, at that time, was me.

Without a second thought, I too ran off into the forest. I wanted to put as much distance between myself and that lake as possible. Admittedly, I wasn't very fit, so I can't say that I ran a great distance, but I did run far enough to come across another trail. I recognized it as the one that looped around to the general camping area and followed that path back instead of the lake trail.

I’m sure I looked like a mess by the time I got back. My uniform was scuffed and untucked. Hair clung to my forehead, sweaty from running. However, to my infinite surprise, the ranger station was dark. Gradually it dawned on me that no one was there, and only the sheet of paper taped to the door gave me any clue as to what happened:

Charles when you get back wash down the ATVs and put them away.

We left early to celebrate Dan’s birthday. Join us if you want.

-Devin.

Un-fucking-believable.

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Chapter 8
Don’t Stare

Charles Walsh: September, 1998.

The following morning Devin stood waiting for me when I arrived with his arms folded.

“One of the ATVs is missing. I don’t suppose you know anything about that?” he accused me before I could even get a word out.

“Yeah, I might know something about it,” I muttered, “It’s still out in the forest where it broke down on me.”

“And you just left it out there?”

“Well, when I got back, no one was here to help me go get it,” I replied bluntly, giving him pause.

“Fine. Go get it now then,” he ordered.

It was all I could do to keep my temper in check. This was utterly ridiculous. As if *I* had planned on *his* equipment breaking and decided to take a pleasant stroll back? I guess to him, I was just the temp transfer. I’d be gone soon, so I didn’t matter. I took my truck out to tow the ATV and cursed Devin the entire way. Never thought I’d miss Barrett’s personality faults; he at least wouldn’t have behaved this unprofessionally.

On the way, I passed by the lake again and hesitated, remembering the deer. I was in about the right spot, near to where I had witnessed the animal getting attacked, and I slowly rolled to a stop as a morbid curiosity drew me toward the lake. It was against my better judgment that I stepped out of the truck and decided to investigate.

In the daylight, everything looked resoundingly normal. There were no signs of a struggle, and the glittery surface of the lake was peaceful. However, the musky rotting odor that drifted on the wind was unmistakable. It came from deeper in the forest, and I left the trail in pursuit. The woods were thick with undergrowth, and I made a good racket pushing my way through the brush. It was hard to see too far ahead, but

when my boots landed on damp ground, I stopped. The smell was almost overpowering, and I regretted not keeping any peppermint rub on me.

Just ahead was the source of the foul smell. Lying motionless in a shrub not four feet away from me was the doe. She was dead and swollen with water leaking from her fur. I knew immediately that this was the same deer I had seen the night before and my heart sank. The thing in the water had touched her, and this was the result. I'd been wrong in assuming it wasn't fatal. Maybe that was just how this thing hunted, like a viper striking its prey and leaving it to die. I shuddered at the notion.

Whatever was going on with this lake was beyond what we were equipped to handle; that much was clear. When I got back, I slumped into the tiny junk desk I had been assigned to and focused more on the management policies side of the job rather than patrolling the empty park. There was plenty to learn from paperwork, and I wasn't especially keen to go near the lake again.

Eventually, when I got fed up sitting in the second-hand smoke of the office, I went out into the reception room to use the phone. Ignoring the disgruntled expression from the receptionist and the baffled look Devin gave me when I left, I called the police station. I hoped they might have gotten some information back on the bodies.

"Hi, it's Deputy Charles calling from the reserve. I'm following up on the bodies found last week. Is the autopsy report available yet?" I asked when the reception worker answered the line.

'One moment please,' he responded, and I waited. A long moment passed before the receiver picked up again.

'Deputy Charles, this is Officer Davids; we met the other night. I'm Lennard's partner.' he introduced himself as if I knew who Lennard was.

"Hi, Officer Davids. Yeah, I was just checking in to see if there was any word back yet on cause of death?" I asked, trying not to sound too unfamiliar. Back in Maine, we don't give out any details about anything over the phone, but I was optimistic that everyone in this area was substandard.

On the other end, Davids was quiet. I could hear him ruffling through papers, and I was almost beginning to wonder if he had intended to hang up

on me but forgot. ‘We got the report back this morning. I haven’t had the chance to read it.’

“Take your time,” I assured, trying not to sound impatient as I twirled the phone cord in my fingers.

‘Okay. Says here that the cause of death was…’ he hesitated then began reading in paraphrases, ‘… *Excessive fluid intake… Due to processes unknown… by an unknown manner*…-’

I interrupted him there, “Cause of death was *not* drowning?”

Another pause.

‘No, unless that’s what they mean by ‘excessive fluid intake’.’

“Huh. That’s odd,” I commented mostly to myself, distracted as a reflective glint crossed the room.

The door into the station opened, and I turned lazily to see who had entered.

“Eric?” I hung up on Davids abruptly and without a second thought, “What are you doing here?” I questioned, dumbfounded.

He looked mildly surprised to see me. “My job. But I believe the better question is: why are *you* here?” he responded without emotion as he turned toward me.

His jacket sleeve hung empty, and his bad arm was bandaged close to his body. The cane in his left hand supporting his stride. He wasn’t someone who could be easily mistaken for anyone else. It’s strange to say, but I was relieved to see him. The calm with which he spoke made me feel like everything was under control now. Or maybe it was just that he was a relatively familiar face.

“Sheriff Barrett sent me. ‘Water safety training’,” I explained, “But if you’re here does that mean…?” I didn’t even need to finish my question.

“Yes.”

“How did you know?”

“Tabloids.” I hadn’t thought of that. I remembered then that Barrett had been reading the newspaper before he sent me here. Did he know this was something unusual?

“Do you, ahhh… *Know* what it is?” I asked hesitantly.

“Not yet. I need to see the lake.”

“The park’s closed, but I can take you out there.”

Eric nodded, “That would be helpful.”

***

We went out in my truck. It was shaping up to be a fine day, not too warm, not too cold. The forest was lush green, and if I hadn’t seen what I had seen, I would have even gone as far as to say that the lake looked inviting. Under normal circumstances, I’m sure the place would probably have been teaming with visitors, but now, it was desolate.

However, as we approached the pier I spotted two teens. They had just taken a running leap off the end of the dock and were messing about in the water. “Ah, crud,” I muttered, slamming on the brakes to come to a sharp stop. I hadn’t considered my passenger in doing this, and he exhaled in shock as he braced himself against the dash before turning to glare over at me.

“A little warning might have been nice,” he complained bitterly.

“Sorry, those kids, they have no idea what could be in there with them,” I explained briefly as I exited the car to march over. “You can’t swim here. The park is closed, and the lake is off-limits. There’s algae blooms this time of year, very poisonous. Get out and go wash, or it’ll melt your skin off,” I stated, using my authority voice.

Eric came to stand beside me momentarily as the kids scrambled to get out of the water. “I didn’t know you had it in you to lie like that,” he commented, amused. The look of pure horror on their faces made me feel slightly guilty; *maybe I had laid it on too thick?* I didn’t mean to scare them to death. Regardless, they followed my instructions and agreed to leave the park.

When I was done with them, I returned my attention to Eric. He was now standing at the end of the pier, looking down into the water. I could see that darkened eye of his focusing below the surface on things I couldn’t hope to imagine. His expression was unreadable, yet he seemed moderately uncomfortable looking into the water.

“Can you, ahh... *see* anything?” I asked, trying to sound encouraging.

“No,” he answered. His expression then was odd, caught somewhere between annoyance and discomfort as he began limping off the pier. “It’s dark down in the water. I can’t see far enough.”

“Warden Devin told me the lake is bottomless. Personally, I can’t see anything in that muck.”

He smiled slightly. “I can see a little bit further than you can.”

“Right,” I returned the smile nervously, unwilling to question him further. I had seen him use whatever abilities it was that he had before, and I wasn’t in any hurry to see him use them again. “So what do you think then?”

At this, he seemed reluctant. “I think this is going to be a miserable experience. I hate the water.” The honesty in his voice caught me off guard. *Was he afraid of it?* I wondered to myself as he continued, “I need to take a walk. There’s something I have to find, and we’re going to need a lot of salt.”

“Is there any special kind of salt we need?” I found myself asking without thinking.

Eric paused for a moment, the conversation was uncomfortable, and we could both feel it. “Any salt is fine. However, smaller grain salt is more effective…”

“Right. Well… be careful out there. I’m pretty sure there’s a monster in the lake,” I said tentatively.

“Something like that,” he agreed, starting off into the forest without another word. It’s difficult to describe how uneasy you feel watching someone disappear into the woods, especially as someone trained to keep people from doing exactly that. However, I had the feeling that I would only slow him down if I accompanied him.

***

Shopping for the salt was awkward. I waited in line listening to the convenience store music with my cart full of salt and prayed no one would ask me anything about it. I wasn’t sure what reasonable excuse I could come up with. I wasn’t even sure there *was* a reasonable excuse for buying so much salt.

When I returned to the office, I was surprised to see the car park full of trucks. They looked like the kind of vehicles that avid hunters would take into the woods, and I briefly wondered why so many of them were here when the park was closed. However, upon approaching the building, there was shouting coming from inside and hurried to see what was happening.

The lobby was full of sweaty, agitated men with rifles and smelled of alcohol and cigarettes. Above the general chatter of the crowd, I could hear Devin's voice as he spoke loudly, "We can't let this lake monster terrorize our community any longer! We must take matters into our own hands and hunt it down!"

There was an uproar of support for his statement, and I got a sinking feeling in my gut. It's generally known that letting a bunch of half-drunk men with guns out into the woods at night doesn't often end well. Carefully, I made my way through the people to the front of the crowd, hoping I would be able to convince Devin out of this plan.

As I reached the front, I was taken aback to see that Eric was already there, speaking to Devin. His expression was one of mild irritation, and he was leaning forward slightly over the front desk, using the fingertips of his left hand to support himself as he spoke in a low dangerous tone. "If you allow all these men to go marching off into the woods, it will be a massacre."

"Nonsense. These men are seasoned hunters, and no one here is afraid," the warden assured.

"You are a bigger fool than Gregory if you believe this is a good idea," Eric retorted.

Devin ignored him then, his attention turning to me. "Charles! Good timing. Will you be joining us?" he asked jovially. I could smell the whiskey on his breath.

"Joining you in what exactly?" I asked to gain some clarity on the situation.

"We are all going out to the lake, and we're going to shoot anything that moves. We'll get the fucker," he assured confidently.

"Devin, I don't think that's a good idea. Getting civilians involved-" he cut me off with a scoff.

“Fine. Stay here then. They breed ‘em weak in Maine, I see. Can’t trust a yank,” he muttered the last part quieter, and I struggled to keep my irritation from showing.

I wanted to argue, but Eric interrupted me, “Don’t waste your breath on the likes of him. Let them do what they like.”

“Are you sure?” was all I could blurt out.

“Did you get the salt?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m sure. It just means I’ll have to work faster. Come,” he ordered as he made his way out of the building.

I followed after Eric as he instructed, and he led me outside. “What are we going to do?” I asked unsurely.

“…We *should* do nothing. Let those idiots get cut down like the fools they are,” he muttered, then added, “Hold onto this for me.”

To my astonishment, he handed me his cane, it was heavier than I expected, and I vaguely remembered seeing him walk without it once before. “You don’t need it?” I asked numbly.

“Not right now,” he mused, though seemed almost entertained by my shock.

“Okay… But how will salt help? What are we going to do?” I repeated, trying to deny the abnormality.

Eric ignored me as he began un-bandaging his right arm. I shuddered remembering it. Discolored skin and fingertips that ended in long blackened claws… I wondered if it was because I had seen it before that he felt no need to hide it from me? I think I preferred it when he kept it bandaged.

Once his arm was unwrapped, he then took off his jacket, folding it over his arm as he walked toward my truck. Under it, he was wearing a dark, sleeveless, top with a silver chain that disappeared beneath it, and an altered version of a lightweight tactical harness over the top. The harness was black leather, with a knife on the belt and a sword on his hip. That was unusual, but not for him, I guess. Although I couldn’t see why he would even need weapons with the claws he had.

The discolored skin ended at his shoulder in trailing lines, almost like scars, and I found myself staring. I couldn’t remember if the discoloration

was that high up before it not, and there were odd silver crescents on his throat located on the right side, just below his jaw. One was slightly larger than the other, and the secondary one was inverted, not far from the first. I had never noticed it before as the collar of his coat was too high, but now I wondered how I missed them, and what they were. Some strange birthmark?

“Charles. You’re staring,” his voice broke through my thoughts.

“I wasn’t- I mean, I just-” I gave up on defending myself, “That looks like it must’ve hurt.”

“Not particularly,” he said calmly, “But I would still prefer it if you didn’t stare.”

I said nothing; I was a trained investigator, and it’s second nature for me to notice things. But perhaps when it came to Eric, I would make an effort to ignore certain details. My silence seemed to satisfy him, “Good. Now, we’re going to act before your friends all get themselves killed.”

It was going to be a long night.

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Chapter 9
Salt

Charles Walsh: October, 1998.

Preparing to fight lake monsters was an experience in its own right. Eric gave me an entire set of instructions, I couldn't remember all of them: Don't let them touch you, and don't fall into the water - those were the main ones. He put the salt I bought into little bags and told me to carry them. If I saw anything, I was supposed to pour salt over it.

By the time we set out, the hunters Devin had called were already out stalking around the lake. They could be heard shouting through the forest, shooting at anything that moved while their flashlights spotted sporadically through the trees, making it difficult to see.

Eric and I stayed beside the lake. He moved without sound as I blundered along behind him. I had seen him track something before, so I knew that strange eye of his was seeing things I couldn't. Still, somehow, I expected that it would be a quicker process than it was. Especially given the urgency of the situation to locate the monster before the hunters.

Regardless it must have been hours into the night before he stopped, and we were quite some distance away from any other person, "Do you see it?" I whispered nervously.

"Not yet. I'm going to see if I can get a better vantage point on the lake. Wait here, and don't move. I'll only be a moment," he instructed, and I nodded. We were right at the edge of the lake, wedged between the thick of the forest and the water itself. He made no sound when he left, and if he hadn't said something, it might have taken me a while to realize I was alone.

I felt distinctly vulnerable then. In the distance, I could still see the lights from the hunters, yet I myself felt isolated. It was like being at a bonfire and stepping back from the crowd. You can still see other people but can't feel their presence, as if you're somehow obscured, and primal instincts tell you to go back closer to the fire so that a predator in the night won't pick you off.

A cold breeze came across the lake, and I shone my flashlight over the surface. A pair of eyes reflected back, and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. The shape was moving toward the edge of the lake, toward *me*. It moved so strangely in the water that, for a second, I was convinced it was the lake monster I had seen before.

However, as it came closer, I came to understand that it was a young woman. She swam slowly but stopped to put an arm up to shield her eyes from the light. Instinctively I lowered the beam. “Sorry!” I called to her, “What are you doing out here? The park is closed, and you really shouldn’t be swimming at this hour.” I was worried the lake monster might find her if she stayed in the water much longer.

She hesitated but didn’t answer me. I thought that was odd at first, then it dawned on me. She seemed to be completely nude. She was skinny dipping, and I must have been standing near where her clothes were. If I were her, I would be nervous too. After all, I was a strange man standing at the lake edge in the middle of the night with a flashlight, a shotgun, and an obsessive amount of salt in little baggies.

I cleared my throat awkwardly, “Ahh, right, sorry, I don’t mean to frighten you. I’m just out on a walk,” I kicked myself for that. Who was just ‘out for a walk’ at this hour? I think the honest embarrassment in my voice must have made her feel safer because she came closer.

Once she reached the shallow water at the edge of the lake, she stood up. Her hair was long and clung to every curve as water ran freely down her body. She was breathtaking, almost seeming to shimmer, and I stared in pure dumbfounded shock as she walked closer to me. It felt like my brain was malfunctioning as she put a hand on my shoulder.

If I had any sense about me, I might have noticed that her skin had a blueish tint or that her eyes were just a little too circular. Instead, I stood perfectly still as she pressed herself close to me. I wasn’t even convinced what was happening until she kissed me, and by then, it was too late.

My lips burned, liquid flooded into my mouth, and I shoved her away. Vaguely I was aware that there was extra movement around me, but I couldn’t focus on what it was as fluid began to leak from my eyes and nose, causing my vision to blur. The flashlight I was holding went out as the water leaking out of me seeped into it, and I could feel my lungs filling with liquid. *I couldn't breathe.*

Of course, by then, I knew what was happening. I was filling with water just as the two bloated bodies had, the same as the deer. It’s amazing how quickly you start to succumb. I knew I was drowning, or something very similar to it. My head started to ache, and I began to feel dizzy; I wondered how long I would last. *Probably not long*.

I’m sure I was drifting between the conscious plane and the next life in those moments. Coughing and gagging, I could feel someone trying to force what I guessed was sand into my mouth. Reflexively I wanted to spit it out. It was so dry and coarse.

“Charles, I swear-” I could hear Eric. His voice sounded like it was far away underwater, but even so, I could tell he was annoyed. “You need to work with me just a little bit here. Eat the salt. Stop spitting it out,” he growled.

I heard what he said but couldn’t process what he wanted me to do. With my mind in its groggy state, it’s a miracle that I eventually figured it out. The sand wasn't sand at all, but fine salt. The taste was overpowering. If you’ve ever eaten an amount of pure salt, you know it’s not fun, and this was way more than a spoonful.

However, the relief was almost immediate. The pressure of the water began to recede as the salt dried me out. Fluid was replaced with the burn of too much sodium and the overwhelming urge to pee, so I figured I would probably be okay. I’m not sure how long it took exactly for me to recover. But when I came to my senses, Eric was standing beside me.

“I told you, *expressly*, not to let them touch you. I said, *specifically*, if you see *anything*, to pour salt on it. Did I not?” he demanded. I tried to answer him, but my throat was too hoarse, so he continued, “I come back, and you’re locking lips with one of them, Charles. Have you no self-control?” he scolded me.

“What… Do you mean, *one*?” I croaked.

“There are more, one less now,” Eric gestured to the water's edge, where I noticed for the first time a gooey mass steaming. It looked like he had ripped it apart, and the way it fizzled reminded me of a slug when you tip salt on them, “Can you walk? We need to move. They will come for their kin, and I don’t know if I can fight two at once.”

With that, I struggled to stand and would have fallen again almost immediately if Eric didn't catch a hold of my arm to keep me up. "Thanks," I mumbled, embarrassed as nausea washed over me. I vomited shortly after that, expelling a mass of salty water in a less-than-dignified way.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, feeling painfully inferior. I'm sure he was anxious to move on, and I was the thing slowing us down.

"You don't need to apologize for being human," Eric answered calmly. I couldn't determine anything he may have thought, and he didn't seem hostile or annoyed, but rather patient instead. His kindness about the situation surprised me, and that only made me feel more guilty.

He supported me, and we moved as quickly as I could manage without dragging him down. Initially, we tried to go directly away from the water into the forest. But I couldn't navigate the rough terrain in my current state, forcing us to walk back beside the lake on the path instead.

Unfortunately, we didn't get far before a soft sloshing from the water indicated we were being followed. The things were there, traveling with us not more than a few feet away. By my count, there were five, and they were gaining. Water began to rise from the lake in familiar spouts, and I knew they were about to attack. I think Eric knew it too, and I cursed myself for our predicament.

"Charles." When he spoke again his voice was tense, "Get as far away as you can. If you get to a point where you can't go any further, draw an unbroken line of salt around yourself and wait until morning."

I didn't have the opportunity to answer before he moved. He left me where I was as he pulled the knife from his belt to hold in his left hand. It looked odd. The blade was fine, made from a black and silver material. Not that I could see well enough in the dark to say with any confidence precisely what it was.

When he turned to face them, the entities in the water hissed in unison, and I got the impression that they were somewhat cautious of him. That something about him unnerved the creatures, and that, in turn, made my blood run cold. I couldn't imagine much worse than them, so what did they have to be afraid of?

Whatever their initial reservations may have been, once they realized Eric was alone, they attacked. Two of them rushed forward from the water.

To my astonishment, they looked primarily humanoid but with scales, extra fins, and no hair. Whatever illusion I had seen of a nude woman was stripped from them, and I shuddered to think that I had kissed something so grotesque with gnashing teeth like that.

With the two came a wave of water, which rose unnaturally from the lake, and Eric cut through that first. His arm sliced through the water, separating it so that it lost form and splashed to the ground uselessly before he moved directly for one of the creatures.

Now I know I shouldn't have been surprised by how quickly he moved; maybe I shouldn't have been watching at all. Honestly, I probably should have been stumbling away into the forest. However, when he connected with the first creature, it was so fast I almost didn't know what had happened.

He seemed to slice it with the blade and smear salt deep into the wound. The thing gargled in what, I could only assume, was a sound of pain as it began to dissolve from the inside out, then Eric turned his attention to the other advancing lake monster. That one he met more evenly. The first may have been caught by surprise, but the second one learned. It moved like a cobra, trying to strike him without allowing him to get too close.

The way Eric moved made me realize that he was, without a doubt, trained for combat. Every step he took was deliberate and calculated. It must have taken him less than a minute to get a good angle on the thing, and once he got a hold of it, he tore it limb from limb. It bled a clear fluid slightly thicker than the consistency of water, and Eric forced salt into every tear as he went.

Watching the way the thing screamed and sizzled was almost disturbing. As was how well Eric fought, he was undoubtedly a trained killer. I wondered then if I was in danger from him? Could someone like him *truly* be trusted? I tried not to let myself think too much about it, and my attention was returned to the battle as I heard Eric exhale in pain. After he had dealt with the first two, the others attacked in unison. He was outnumbered three to one, and one of them had managed to get a hold of him.

The thing had bitten down hard on his right arm. The strange skin there seemed to crack at the points of pressure under the teeth as if it was made of ceramic. I was almost surprised to see him bleed red like any other person

would. The blood sent the deranged fish monsters into a frenzy of victory, and they hissed with pleasure.

Eric managed to pull himself free of the thing's grasp, only to be immediately set upon again. He moved to avoid their attacks, but they were advancing, and he was defending. The injury to his arm undoubtedly made fighting more complicated, his range of motion was restricted, and he faltered.

As I watched in horror, it dawned on me that he was outmatched. They were bigger, there were more of them, and he had run out of salt. They were going to win. I knew it, he knew it, and *they* knew it. I waited for him to retreat. He certainly had enough skill that he could disengage, but he didn't. Initially, I couldn't figure out why, then it dawned on me that he was fighting them longer to give me more time to escape.

Time that I was wasting watching the battle instead of running away. Quickly I scrambled into action. I emptied the rounds in my shotgun and carefully packed salt into the shells. I don't know how well I did, my hands were trembling, and I didn't know if it would work; still, I had to at least try. I had used salt shells in training, but I wasn't sure if I was packing them correctly or not.

I reloaded the weapon, took aim, and fired. The shot traveled better than I was expecting and sprayed a cloud of fine salt on impact. There was a moment of tense confusion. Eric looked surprised while the creatures screeched in shock and pain. Everything seemed to come to a complete standstill as understanding dawned.

Thankfully, the second of hesitance from them was all Eric needed. He tore through one and moved on the second. However, the third creature turned to me. Its flat eyes were calculating where the attack had come from as I scrambled to reload. It was upon me in seconds, and when I tried to fire the gun again, it jammed.

I must've fired it wrong the first time, or perhaps the improvised salt shells hadn't done it any favors. Either way, it wouldn't work. To slow the thing's advance, I threw the whole shotgun at it and then hurried to find something else to defend myself with. Moving too rapidly made my head spin, but I managed to pull the final bag of salt from my belt and launch it at the creature.

The thing evaded that attempt, and the bag hit the ground uselessly as I floundered to get away. For my efforts, I fell back through the edge of the forest. Desperately I reached for the nearest object, and my hand closed around a solid mass. I knew it was over then. I was making my final stand in the shrubbery with a rock. Heroic, I know.

In the near distance I could hear others shouting. The commotion must have finally attracted Devin and his group. Although I knew there was nothing they could do against this thing, they didn't know about the salt. All they had were regular bullets and I hoped I could smash the stone into its face with enough force to hold it off.

However, if Eric hadn't sliced through the creature at that moment, I'm sure I would have died. The relief was instant, and I allowed the rock to fall from my hand. It was just unfortunate that the thing crumpled on top of me. A viscous blood-like fluid spilled from its body, and I was soaked in that all too familiar sun-dried algae smell. That alone was enough to make me vomit again.

By the time Devin and the others reached us, Eric was helping me up out of the brush. They arranged themselves in a loose line staring at us, guns held close. I could only imagine what they must have been thinking. Around us, piles of steaming mush that were once overzealous murder-fish were dissolving. Meanwhile, Eric stood beside me, and I looked half-drowned. I felt weak, and I was sure I was close to passing out.

Slowly the flashlights landed on Eric, and his darker eye contracted back to a narrow slit as lights shone on his face. He stood straight and held his good hand over the puncture wounds on his damaged arm. Blood slowly leaked through his fingers, trickling down his arm and dripping from his fingertips into the dry dirt. Regardless Devin raised a gun to point it at him, and Eric tilted his head up in response, almost daring him to try it.

"Charles, are you alright here?" Devin asked, his eyes fixated on Eric and his strange arm.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Eric got the lake monsters," I tried to de-escalate the tense situation.

"Some kind of freak, is he?" The Warden muttered with a gruff snort of disapproval. I thought he might shoot Eric just for the sake of it.

"He saved our lives," I responded coldly.

Devin seemed to consider my statement, and I hoped he was beginning to understand the debt he owed. However, his response showed otherwise. “I think it’s best he leaves now. Before anything else *unfortunate* happens here,” he said in a low tone. The threat in his words was thinly veiled.

My disappointment with Devin’s leadership and decision-making at that moment was immense. I’m not sure what I had expected from him. Maybe I had assumed he would be somewhat grateful, or at the very least, that he would lower his gun, but he did not. Instead, his stance remained unchanged, and I realized he meant what he said. He wanted Eric to leave immediately.

I was about to argue with him when Eric spoke up, catching me by surprise, “As you wish. Do get Charles to a hospital though. He’s going to need additional care.” He stated calmly, apparently unfazed by Devin’s attitude. I suppose he was used to it.

“We’ll get Charles patched up,” he agreed, “But you need to go. Now.”

Eric turned slightly to me, and safety released on several guns in preparation as he did so. “Try not to make a habit of finding monsters, Charles; it’s not good for your health,” he commented, and I realized that was his way of saying goodbye, as he then moved to go. Turning his back on the men, he walked away down the path into the darkness.

It shouldn’t have had to be that way. I was sure he needed medical attention, and I wanted to protest against his being forced to leave, but I had no strength left. My vision blurred, and the axis of the world tilted as I fell. I don’t think anyone caught me that time, and I met the ground as black stars blotted out my sight.

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I awoke a couple of days later in the hospital. Apparently, my system was so flooded with fluid that they had given me diuretics to flush out the water, and as a result, I was hooked up to some very uncomfortable machinery. Devin came to see me sometime after. He told me I was being transferred back to Maine early. I suspect that was to keep me from talking about my experience with anyone else. Not that I minded at all. I couldn’t wait to get away from Oklahoma and its cursed lakes.

However, what bothered me most was that I couldn’t thank Eric for saving my life for a second time. Devin’s reaction to him didn’t sit right with me. I thought about how often Eric must have had firearms aimed at him, and I wondered why he would even continue to help people under those circumstances.

They discharged me with clearance to work again in two weeks’ time. I packed up the hotel room and loaded my gear into the truck. That was when I remembered Eric’s cane. I had left it in the front seat after he handed it to me, but it was gone now. I don’t know when, or how, he could have gotten it, and I decided I didn’t want to think about it too much either. I had a feeling that I would see him again the next time something strange happened.

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Chapter 10
Performing Miracles

Kenzou Hagihara: 1955.
Recount: February, 1930.

The new doctor sat across the table from me politely. He wore a set of shaded glasses, I bet he thought he was smart with his neat, iron-pressed coat. With him, he carried a clipboard and pen, ready to take notes, but I doubted he would listen. My last doctor assumed I was crazy; maybe I am a little. But it's because of them. They did this to me, and no one believes me!

He sat, quiet and still, as he waited. Don't know what he wanted. Can't see why he would wait. Time drew on, and my leg jiggled anxiously; *what was he waiting for?* Wasn't he going to ask any questions? The tables immediately around us were empty, but that wasn't good enough. If he wanted me to talk, we needed to be in a secured room with no one else.

"We can't talk here!" I spat at last, "Too many ears."

"We can relocate to your room if you would prefer?" he offered kindly.

"Yes. *Yes*," maybe this one was different. Maybe he understood.

He gestured for me to lead the way, and I grabbed his arm, pulling him with me. "They eat CHILDREN!" I hissed with urgency along the way. He didn't answer, and I shook him firmly as I repeated myself. "Did you hear me? They eat children!"

"I heard you," he assured, and I relaxed. Good, good. He was listening. He was a good one.

We reached my room, and I shut the door firmly behind us. The room needed to be secured, and quickly. They have spies everywhere. I let go of the doctor and hurried to barricade the door, closing the curtains and stuffing blankets under the crack at the bottom of the door.

Once I deemed the room was safe, I began explaining anew. I had the whole thing memorized, word for word. I replayed it every day in my head, and I thought about it constantly to make sure I didn't omit any details. In the shower, at breakfast, on the toilet, it didn't matter. Sometimes, I even repeated the conversations aloud to myself so that I wouldn't forget:

"My father immigrated from Japan to this country, he married an American woman soon after, and I was born here along with my sister. He fought in the war too." I paused momentarily, then added, "The first war, I mean. I learned two languages growing up and found work in journalism."

I needed to explain my career achievements in great detail. He needed to understand why I wasn't crazy, and how I knew what I had seen was true. The horrible images flashed through my mind, and I had to stop. I twitched with anxiety and picked at the skin around my fingernails as I continued:

“...After I became head journalist, I received all manner of invitations to press events. Celebrity occasions, invention unveilings, medical *demonstrations*,” I shuddered involuntarily.

“Then, one day, I was invited to the ‘Dunkel Institute of Psychiatry’. The Small family owned the Institute, and it was well known for performing miracles: healing incurable afflictions. They had never before opened their doors to the press. I was, as far as I knew, the only journalist to ever be requested. I would have to travel interstate to attend, but the invitation was all-inclusive, with both travel and accommodation accounted for. I thought it would make my career. So I accepted the invitation.

The establishment itself was quite some way out into the country and the boundary of the property was unmistakable. It was a giant black iron fence that stretched as far as the eye could see on either side. There were sharp points at the top of every post, and it looked impossible to climb. I should have known then that something was wrong. Instead, I assumed it was a status symbol of their wealth, that they were rich eccentrics who valued security, or at least that was what I had intended to write in my article.

Passing through the perimeter fence gates, the air seemed to shimmer around us, and it took a further five or so minutes to reach the building. It was a magnificent structure. A true castle made from dark flagstone, supported by stained timber braces, and garnished with slate tiles. It was surrounded by a medieval-style township and a perimeter wall. I couldn’t imagine how old it was.

My transport pulled up to the front gate of the building, and I stumbled out awestruck. I imagined I wouldn’t even have to write about the conference. Only writing about the castle's exterior would have the papers flying off the press. I wasn’t sure where I was meant to go from there. Was I supposed to knock on the gates or speak to the guards out front? It hardly mattered, for as I stood transfixed, a shiny black vehicle came down the drive behind us.

It very nearly hit me as it skidded to a stop in a cloud of dust. The driver stepped out with haste and moved to the back passenger door. He was a very striking man. Younger than I by quite some years or blessed by the gods. His hair was a white blonde, and he wore expensive apparel. However, his fine clothes were ruined, scorched, it looked like. My mother

always said a man's worth is in his wardrobe, and I'm sure she wished I was as handsome as this man was.

As I watched, he pulled a child from the car. The boy was no more than nine years old, he had dark hair, and his clothes were in rough shape. He held onto the man, hiding his face away as he was carried. They walked past me to the gates, and the smell of smoke wafted in the air, as if there had been a fire. I later realized that it was the pair of them that smelt burned and that the child wasn't merely covered in dirt, but in ashes, soot, and what looked like blood.

" ***Wash my car, then put it away. And say not a word to my brother about this*** ." The man hissed at the guards as he passed, then he noticed me for the first time. He was startled to see me and paused momentarily. His eyes were an unusual shade of green and narrowed like a cat's. He held my gaze for a long moment before abruptly turning on his heels and disappearing into the castle.

I got the distinct feeling that I had just been threatened despite him not saying a word. My presence was unwelcome, or maybe I had just seen something I wasn't supposed to. I was still recovering from the brief exchange when a lady approached, "Mr. Hagihara?" she asked, catching me off guard.

"Yes," I answered, giving a bow impulsively. The woman was just as beautiful as the man. She was shorter than I, with long straight honey brown hair and deep brown eyes. She wore a long simple dress and smiled at me as if it amused her that I had bowed.

"My name is Molly. Please come with me, you have arrived later than we intended, and the demonstration is about to begin. I will arrange for all your belongings to be brought to your room."

I followed her as I was told, watching her hair sway side to side above her defined hips as she walked ahead of me.

The interior of the castle was just as magnificent as the exterior and far larger than I could have ever imagined. Pathways made of cobblestone wide enough for a car to pass through made up the entire outer-inner layer, and mounted torches lined the walls.

Molly walked with purpose and knowledge until we came to a stop outside a set of wooden double doors. "Your seat will be in the second row,

on the left," she instructed while opening one side of the door and gesturing for me to enter.

Inside it was dim, and the air smelt of freshly cut roses, though I could see no flowers. I found my seat easily, for it had a small silver tray and a 'reserved' sign sitting on it with my name printed in Japanese. This surprised me, as never before had any event used my native language, written or otherwise.

The seats were plush, covered in red velvet, and arranged in a semi-circle, not unlike that of a theatre. Ahead, at the center of the room, was a stage set with a medical table that had heavy leather straps. There were others seated in the area. I could hear the quiet murmurs of a crowd, but with the low lighting, I couldn't see them well.

I took my seat and was setting up the typewriter when a waiter came with a tray of glasses and food to offer me refreshments. I declined the drink but took a small pastry. Then the lighting in the room changed, the stage lit up and the crowd quietened. A man stepped onto the platform, he walked with authority, and his boots clacked on the wood with assurance.

He too was a handsome gentleman. He looked astoundingly similar to the man I had seen at the gates, except his hair was long and tied over his shoulder with a black ribbon so that only the shorter parts fell forward at the front. His attire was old, quite out of fashion for the time, with a high collar and ruffled down the neckline to the breast of his coat. An excited murmur passed through the crowd, and I understood I wasn't the only one to notice his unusual choice of clothing.

Nonetheless, he spoke with confidence. "My friends, thank you all for coming to this exciting occasion. I am Doctor Achaicus Small, and today I intend to cure one of those among you. As such, you are sure to witness nothing short of a miracle. Whether you have a family member afflicted by voices of the mind or are yourself troubled by the darkest of thoughts, we are here to offer you hope for a bright future," his voice carried across the room like a ringmaster at the circus. "If you would like to be chosen for yourself or a loved one, all you need do is pray in your heart for it as hard as you can. I will choose the loudest voice shortly."

I typed feverishly, trying to print out all the important details as fast as I could. This was exactly the kind of story that people would gossip about in the streets for days: an outlandish doctor, dressed in fashion from the 1700s,

curing impossible diseases. I thought myself fortunate to catch this story before anyone else.

Looking closely around the crowd, I noticed what I had missed initially. Many of them seemed to be sickly in some way or another. Someone not two seats to my right looked as near to death as anyone I had ever seen; behind me sat a person with abnormal facial features, wide eyes, and a seemingly permanent smile. I was sitting in a crowd of the afflicted, and that knowledge made me immediately uncomfortable.

Still, no good article was written without some discomfort. On stage, the doctor closed his eyes, giving off the impression of ‘listening’ to the crowd’s silent pleas. I could tell by then that this was a farce. Nothing more than clever showmanship preying on the vulnerable. There was no way any one of those around me could be cured.

At last, Doctor Achaicus opened his eyes, his gaze settling on someone in the crowd several rows past me to the right. “Frederick,” he spoke the name in a sickly-sweet tone. “Your mother’s voice is very loud; I will grant you restoration.”

I couldn’t see who he was talking about, but I could hear a woman sobbing in relief as two of the Doctor’s assistants approached her. When they came back down, they were carrying between them a man. The man chosen was extremely unwell. Drool flowed freely from the edges of his mouth, and he sagged to one side, all the while making the most disturbing noises.

To be quite frank, it was disturbing to see. Nonetheless, Doctor Achaicus strode over without any reservations. He placed a hand on the man’s shoulder and spoke directly to him. I learned how to read lips long ago, a handy talent to have if you’re too far from an important conversation in my line of work. Still, I instinctively leaned forward to hear what he said.

“You will be well soon; your mother has made a generous offer for you,” he whispered. I’m unsure if I truly heard the words.

Fredrick was then taken and placed on the table center stage. With assistance from the two who had brought him, he was strapped down, and a woman I recognized to be Molly approached with rolls of bandage in her hands. She placed the bandages down and, at the Doctor's direction, set about checking all the straps were tight while he explained. “This poor soul

is Frederick. His mind has stretched too far, he cannot speak, and he agonizes every moment. But today, *I* will cure him," he began.

"I have only but to place my hand upon him, and he will be cured, for you see, I possess a kind of magic, gifted to me by 'God'. I can use this ability on any who asks, if they have *the will for it*." Achaicus then moved to place a hand on Fredrick's chest.

A faint glow emitted from his fingertips, and in response, Fredrick screamed. It was blood curling, nothing short of primal pain and fear. Thankfully it didn't last long before he began to convulse and foam at the mouth. Molly placed the bandages between his teeth, presumably to stop him from biting his tongue off, then it was just a matter of time. I can't tell you exactly how long it went on for, but I can say that both Molly and the Doctor seemed perfectly at ease while the crowd murmured nervously around me.

When at last Fredrick began to recover, the effects were astounding. He no longer drooled, nor did he make any unsavory sounds. Molly released the restraints holding him, and he sat up. He looked momentarily confused. As if he had woken from a deep sleep, then he spoke, "Where am I?" he murmured, looking out at the crowd with uncertainty.

I sat forward in my chair with great interest. Fredrick appeared to be not only cured but *improved*. He looked better than most people ever did. He was handsome now, his body was no longer contorted in unusual ways, and his speech was perfect. From the crowd, a woman, who I assumed was his mother, rushed down to the stage. She threw her arms around Fredrick, wrapping him in a tight embrace which he returned unsurely.

"What a beautiful moment," the Doctor commented with a smile. "Cured and reunited with those who matter most. I can help all of you. Over the next few days, I will make myself available to hear all your pleas. You have all been assigned a time; it is written on the back of your reservation sign. You should be diligent in attending your assigned session. Please also remember that patience is a virtue. I will not see anyone before their assigned time, no matter the reason."

I checked the back of my reservation then. The time written was *1:07 a.m. Wednesday*. An odd time I thought, but stranger still was why I would need an appointment at all. I was sound of mind, and no one I knew was

afflicted. Aside from satisfying my curiosity, I couldn't see any reason I should have a meeting with him.

The doctor continued talking, but I paid little mind as movement at the edge of the stage caught my attention. The man I had seen at the gates arrived there and stood beside the platform. His clothes were by this time freshened; he wore a dark blue vest, and black rings garnished his fingers.

He spoke to Molly briefly. "You're late," she stated blandly. However, if that was the case, the man showed no sign that he cared. He simply stepped up onto the stage, and Achaicus stopped speaking mid-sentence.

"I-… little brother," Achaicus smiled, "At last. I was beginning to think you wouldn't make it! Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce to you my baby brother, Doctor Nathaniel Small, do try not to get us confused. He believes in being tardy to all events."

Nathaniel bowed politely before speaking. "Dressed as you are, Brother, I doubt many could confuse us," he assured the crowd, joining in the jest. It was only then that I noticed how similar they did indeed appear. If not for the variance in dress and hairstyle, I might not have been able to determine which was which.

"Perhaps," the man responded, appearing slightly annoyed at the returned remark. I'm trained to notice those kinds of things you know. Nothing sells papers like conflict and scandal.

After that we were permitted to leave. In order to make my appointment time I would need to stay one more day, as it was only Tuesday. In truth, I had no intention of attending the session. Instead, I planned to use the extra time to investigate. I was sure I would dig up some dirt on the esteemed Small family… With the odd nature of these people, I believed I could get enough material to keep people hanging on the papers for days.

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Chapter 11
They Eat Children!

Kenzou Hagihara: 1955.

Recount: February, 1930.

As soon as it got dark, I left my assigned room and skulked about the castle. At first, all seemed disappointingly normal; I wandered the corridors and found nothing. Speaking to servants of the manner was also pointless. No one would speak to me. Instead, most looked at me with disgust, which would make for dull reading.

However, as I rounded the bend in the corridor, I heard the footfall of others and accompanying voices. Thinking quickly, I slowed my pace and quieted my steps to listen.

“You seem to be in better spirits now, little Brother. You were so dreary for weeks after your pet orphan died, but did you really have to burn down the orphanage? It’s going to take months to find another suitable source.” I recognized the voice. It was Doctor Achaicus, and I didn’t initially understand what he was talking about.

After a long moment and no response, Achaicus spoke again, “Come now, Nathaniel, you’re not still upset, are you? I allowed you to attend the funeral as you wished. What more do you need?” he sounded exasperated.

“Must you always go to such lengths with the theatrics?” Nathaniel responded at last, changing the subject.

“Humans love showmanship. And you know as well as I that they will give so much more if they believe God is making the request.”

“It’s distasteful.”

“Is that what your problem is now?”

“Why must you insist something is wrong? You said yourself that I’m no longer ‘dreary’. What more is it that you want?”

There was another long pause, “You’re hiding something from me; I know it.”

“I’m hiding nothing. I will find another way to get more children; we have supply enough for now. Focus your time on your ‘miracles,’ but I will have nothing more to do with it. I have other matters to attend to…”

I strained to hear more as the voices faded, and when I followed after them, I found only empty hallways. It was perplexing that they could get far enough ahead of me that I would lose them in such a short stretch of time. Disappointed, I returned to my room to lament over their conversation.

As far as I knew, the Dunkel Institute did not deal with children, only adults. I remembered the child I witnessed at the gates with Nathaniel. Perhaps I was wrong. I pondered on it for a considerable time, I couldn’t imagine what any establishment would need a supply of orphans for, but I was determined to uncover the truth. I had found my headline story.

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It’s sometimes difficult to know where to start an investigation. Fortunately, I was in the business of exposing secrets. I knew where to find things people didn’t want found, and so I spent the following day lurking in lesser traveled halls. If there was a crowd, I avoided the area and whenever I caught word of any hushed conversation, I listened in.

Unfortunately, I made little progress. At one time, I followed Achaicus all the way to his personal chambers; there was nothing exciting in that to report. However, as I was making my way back, I stumbled across what seemed to be a private garden. I didn’t think I would find anything of interest there, but the plants fascinated me.

They were unlike any I had ever seen. There were trees and shrubs of all sizes with iridescent glowing flowers. Perplexed, I moved through the foliage carelessly until the sound of metal hitting on metal caught my attention, and I hid quickly.

From my vantage point I could see Nathaniel; he was wielding a sword and sparring with a much smaller opponent. I had never seen anyone use a sword before and haven’t since. They’re such an outdated weapon. Even my father kept his katanas for show only. So it was with a start that it dawned on me; the man was sparring with a child, the one I had seen him with before.

The boy seemed slow and struggled to move effectively as the man swung at him. He was wearing a leg brace and I watched in horror as he fell back. He flinched as Nathaniel swung the sword down on him, stopping only a breath away from slicing him in two.

“You lose,” Nathaniel stated calmly.

“…Fight me again. I’ll win.”

“Delusional,” the man scoffed as he helped him stand, “You’re far too weak to win.”

“I’m not weak! It’s my leg. You said if I fulfilled the contract-”

Nathaniel held up a hand, interrupting him. “Now Eric, you didn’t ‘fulfill’ the contract. You broke it. I know as well as you do that you didn’t kill that nun.”

The boy looked surprised, “Yes I did! I stabbed her. How do you know?” he lied poorly, as children do when caught out.

“I know because it was another who fulfilled the contract. Now answer me this, you had the intent and named her as your choice. So why did you change your mind when you found her? Moreover, your job was already done; why pull the knife out? And why put it back in? Did you think I would be so easily fooled?”

“...No, I wasn’t trying to trick you. I thought I had done it by thinking about it with magic, and I was scared... So I pulled it out to help, but I guess it doesn’t work that way for her… I put it back in to make it look like I hadn’t been there,” he murmured.

“You would never have enough power to pull off something like that after only a handful of lessons. What about the fire? If I had not arrived in time, you would have burned to death.”

“I didn’t mean to start the fire. I stepped back too far, and the candle touched the curtains…” he explained quietly, and Nathaniel burst into laughter, “It’s not funny!” the child exclaimed, annoyed.

“And I thought you were clever. I believed you had the *will* to do as contracted and the cunning to cover it up. At the very least, I assumed you had the deceit to lie to me effectively about it when you failed.” He spoke almost as if daring the child to oppose him.

Eric grit his teeth, “Make another contract for me. I’ll do anything. I want to walk again!”

“No,” Nathaniel stated calmly, moving as if he intended to go. “Your will is too weak. You don’t mean your words. You don’t want it enough; that much is clear.”

“I do have the will for it!” the child insisted. His voice rose in slight panic as the man moved to leave without him.

“Oh? Prove it. Then I will grant you a new contract.”

“How?” he asked quickly, jumping at the opportunity.

“By showing me your strength of will,” Nathaniel mused. But offered a small kindness in waiting for the child to catch up to him, “Until then, I expect you will continue to train even as you are.”

“But with my leg…”

“I don’t care. Are you weak, or are you not? You will train with your disadvantages until you earn another contract,” the man said simply. I felt sick watching. He was manipulating this child flawlessly. And to what end? To have him murder someone? Would the child walking again be another ‘miracle’ like that I had witnessed with Fredrick? I had more questions than answers.

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I remained hidden among the foliage until they left the area, then I waited longer just to be sure, before eventually returning to my room. Now, I was careful to retrace my steps. I paid attention to the turns I had taken so that I would be able to find my way back. However, I must have become confused, for I soon realized that all the hallways were different.

There were far too many turns, and landmarks, such as specific doors I remembered, were nowhere to be seen. Corners that previously only led one way were now intersections that led in multiple directions. When I came across a staircase leading down, I knew I was completely disorientated. It was an ornate staircase with small monstrous figures set on top of each banister post. I hadn’t passed a staircase of any kind beforehand, let alone one so recognizable.

Panic was beginning to set in. I convinced myself I would find the way out faster if I picked up the pace, and before long, I was running. The halls continued seemingly without end; it was like a labyrinth. I don't know how many hours I spent in that place. There were no other people. No servants, no other guests, nor any other living thing at all.

Time seemed to stretch. I was caught in a hallucinative state. I imagined that I was running on the ceiling of a spinning room, or that gravity was inverting as I climbed the walls. I thought I must have been poisoned. Perhaps the shrub I had hidden in was some kind of toxin?

Eventually, I lay down in defeat. The floor was smooth and cold. It seemed oddly inviting. I can't recall how long I was there before footsteps and voices echoed through the halls. I recognized them immediately. The Small Brothers again:

"-you were sent to collect livestock, not contracts!" Achaicus was saying. There was a spiteful tone to his voice, but he sounded far off and muffled as if I were underwater.

"Now, now Brother, I simply saw an opportunity to collect both and took it," Nathaniel responded sedately.

"You could have told me before-" the Doctor began, spite giving way to annoyance.

"Before telling Father and allow you the opportunity to counteract me? No, I think not. You don't have to do as he pleases all the time. We owe him nothing."

There was an agitated pause before Achaicus spoke again in a lower tone, "You should put that orphan with the rest in the meat farm. Mother and Father won't approve of you keeping him as a pet. He won't stay small forever. You know human children grow quickly. And he already has an attitude! He's not one that will be easily trained. What do you intend to do when he gets bigger?"

"You concern yourself too much. Eric is very manageable; he learns fast, and have you ever seen one with such blue eyes? I will tell Mother and Father once he is trained. Why don't you handle your own contracts and stop worrying about me. I have everything perfectly under control."

"I've heard those words before, Nathaniel. You haven't thought this through. You can't keep him as a pet; he has no use! He will grow and be

too dangerous to keep!” Achaicus insisted.

“Nonsense, he has a sweet nature.”

“It is not nonsense! You *cannot* keep bringing stray creatures home and insisting you can care for them. Do you not remember the last time?!”

“‘This is *nothing* like the last time!”

“You say that, but you’re already too attached. You even call that orphan by his human name,” Achaicus sounded disgusted.

“And *you* allow contracts to run about the halls without supervision,” Nathaniel answered flatly, now clearly annoyed. My skin prickled; was he talking about me running around the halls unsupervised?

“I know exactly where the journalist is. His appointment will start soon,” he responded with a matter-of-fact tone, and I broke into a cold sweat. They *were* talking about me.

Without a moment's hesitation, I got up from the floor and ran. I didn’t care where I went, I had to get away and soon found myself standing atop the stairs again. At the bottom of them was a carved wooden door. It swung inward easily on silent hinges, and I slipped into the room. Beyond was a narrow corridor with a light at the end.

The smell of chemicals filled the air, and I knew something was wrong immediately. This wasn’t an area I was supposed to be in. Still, my inquisitive nature encouraged me forward, and I proceeded with caution to the end of the hall before stepping into the next room. It was extremely clean and strangely cold. The floors sloped slightly and had drainage down the center. It looked as if the area had been wetted down recently.

Partitions separated the room, and rows of industrial stoves were set into spacious countertops. Chef’s tools hung along the backboards above the benches, and I realized that the room must be the castle’s kitchen. There were ovens along the back wall, and pantries that I could only imagine must have been well stocked, given the level of organization.

I was so profoundly astonished by the place I was in that I had almost forgotten I was being pursued. However, when I heard the door into the hallway close, I scrambled to find an exit. There was a second door at the other end of the room, and I hurried for it. Only narrowly avoided discovery as I ducked into the room beyond.

Stepping into the new room was something I immediately regretted, for it was a meat factory. Every space was filled with flesh. It hung from hooks in the ceiling, saggy piles of skin were being rolled away on a conveyor belt, and blood was draining from hanging carcasses into containers.

At first, I assumed the remains were those of exotic animals, apes, or monkeys of some kind, for they weren't any recognizable domestic animal. Regrettably, the longer I stared, the more I came to understand that the meat was, in actuality, human. The bodies were small, child-sized, and hard to recognize without hands, feet, or heads.

Automated machinery churned the corpses, and unusual workers operated the processing stations. Some of them turned to look at me when I entered. They appeared human enough, except their eyes glowed faintly. Perhaps they were wondering how I had come to be in their workroom rather than on the meat hooks.

My knees gave way, and I sank to the ground-.."

I stopped abruptly as someone knocked loudly on the door to my room.

"Ken, Kenzou Hagihara, you open this door right now!" It was one of the nurses. Did she know what I was talking about? Was she coming to get me? To drag me back to that place!? I crouched down and shouted in Japanese for her to leave.

"Ahh, it seems we are almost out of time," the man with me sounded mildly inconvenienced." ***Never mind her. Please continue, Mr. Hagihara*** ," he spoke firmly, and I was compelled to continue:

"..-My knees gave way, and I sank to the ground," I started again. "I can't describe the feeling you get walking into such a place. The way your stomach twists and your heart beats so fiercely you fear it will explode. A hand came to rest on my shoulder, and I froze.

"Mr. Hagihara, it seems you have stumbled into an area you weren't invited into. Please come with me now." It was Dr. Achaicus Small. He smiled down at me kindly as if nothing at all was wrong. As if we *weren't* standing in a slaughterhouse. I noticed then that his teeth were too sharp, and his eyes unnaturally luminous. He was a devil that ate humans.

Despite his request, I couldn't move; I was locked in a state of fear. He looked at me with sympathy as if he understood. "You can't move, can you? No matter. ***Stand*** ," he commanded. Something indiscernible in his voice changed, and my body followed the instruction.

“ ***Come*** ,” he added with a wave of his hand, gesturing for me to follow, and I involuntarily began to move. We walked back through the kitchen and up the stairs. His long hair trailed behind him, and he didn’t check to see if I was following or not.

He led me back down the hallways and opened a door in the wall that I hadn’t seen before. Inside was a comfortably furnished office. Molly stood as still as a statue beside the desk; the mask of friendliness had dropped, and her expression was cold, emotionless.

“ ***Sit*** ,” Achaicus instructed, and I did. Whatever power he held over me released, and my body became my own again as he took the seat opposite me across the desk.

“You were quite fortunate; you’ve arrived precisely in time for your appointment. I don’t care for tardy clients,” he lamented as Molly poured two glasses of wine and offered one to me. “You should drink. We have much to discuss,” Achaicus encouraged.

I couldn’t find any words to speak. I watched him slide the glass toward me with wide eyes and made no move to accept the drink.

“No? Very well. We will get right into it then,” he shrugged nonchalantly as if it mattered not to him. “What kind of contract would you like to make with me for your life?”

“A contract… for my life?” I asked weakly. My own voice sounded alien to me. Barely a whisper was all I could manage.

“Yes, of course! By my design, you have seen far more than I’m sure you had ever wanted to. You cannot simply go freely now, but you do have several exciting options. What are your thoughts on the matter?” his eyes gleamed as he leaned forward.

I heard what he was saying but couldn’t quite comprehend, “Why..?” I murmured.

A smile spread from ear to ear; *he probably heard that question often*, I thought. “Why? Well, there are certain forms of value in my world. Meat, magic, other items of interest,” he said vaguely, then clarified for my understanding. “That is to say, ‘food’, ‘power’ and ‘money’ are among the most valuable.”

“…Which am I?” I asked now.

“That depends on you. Which would you prefer to be? Mature meat is of lesser worth, not as tender or juicy, but we do trade in it. Or, of course, you may make a deal with me now. I will simply take something of value from you, and in exchange, you will get the remaining years of your life to live out before we collect you.”

There was hardly a choice. “A deal. I’ll make a deal,” I agreed quickly.

“Delightful!” Achaicus clasped his hands together, thinking, “What should it be? What is the most valuable thing you could offer me?”

I thought he was asking me, and I didn’t know what I could offer, “My soul..?” I whispered, horrified.

Achaicus looked surprised, then laughed wholeheartedly, “The soul of a sleazy journalist? I think not. You see, the most valuable souls are not offered so easily. The very fact that you offered it first means it has a low value,” he explained, “No, I want something you never realized you needed so dearly. I want your sanity.”

“My sanity…?” I questioned. I wasn’t a fool; I wanted to understand the entirety of the deal first.

“Yes, believe it or not, the price for one's sanity is quite high, and I have a buyer in mind. So, the proposal is this. I will release you from the constraining bounds of sanity, and you will be allowed to leave this place with your life.”

I believed it was a good deal…”

I trailed off. To seal the contract he had marked me. It was a small crescent on my temple hidden under my hair, and the proof I had that what I said was true. “Do you see? *Do you see?!*” I asked as I hysterically pushed my hair back to show him.

“Yes, I can see,” the doctor assured, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Good. You believe me then!”

“I do,” he smiled tightly, his canine teeth were longer than they should have been, but I couldn’t think why that would be. “Thank you for sharing all that you have with me.”

Outside, the nurses were *still* banging on the door to get in, and a strange thought occurred to me. Why wasn’t this doctor concerned? Why did he ignore them? He removed his glasses, rubbing his eyes as if wearing them caused a strain.

“It would seem you’re a troublesome man; I wouldn’t have expected you to go to such lengths to remember. It’s fortunate that I caught word of your stories. Otherwise, you might have caused us some grief.”

What was he talking about? His eyes came to rest on me and understanding dawned. His purple eyes luminesced in the same way Achaicus's did, and I cursed myself for not realizing sooner. *He was one of them!*

I recoiled as the man stood and calmly opened the door allowing the frantic nurses in. They seemed startled to see him, and I understood he was not known to them. He wasn't supposed to be here. Then he spoke the command.

" ***Lobot omize him.***"

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Chapter 12
I’m Considering Quitting

Charles Walsh: November, 1998.

Autumn in Maine: the leaves turn from lush green to rustic orange, and the late-season hikers clear out. At the Sheriff’s office, we prepare for the winter. For the most part, this means stocking up for emergency management scenarios, checking all the generators, ensuring our spare batteries are working, and restocking the medical supplies.

For me, this meant that Sheriff Barrett saddled me with all the park work that needed to be done almost as soon as I got back from Oklahoma. I spent my days outside raking leaves, covering over potholes, checking trail markers, and watching my breath steam in the chilled air. Not that I minded. Paperwork wasn’t for me, and I dared not disturb Diane’s delicate arrangement of files, or she might skin me alive.

A lot of the time I worked under the supervision of Allison Moore, who was the head park ranger. She was a plush lady with salt-and-pepper gray hair styled in an afro. Being only 5’2”, you would expect she would be meek or shy, but she was quite unashamedly the opposite. When she addressed me, her voice rang clear through the woods.

“Charles, it’s time for lunch! You need to get some meat on those bones!” she called with her hands on her hips as if she expected me to have known already. *Maybe I should have*. She kept me busy all day with endless tasks, but we usually took lunch together at the local diner, and she always insisted on paying.

While we ate she talked about her family. They were coming up for the holiday season, and she wanted me to meet her daughter. My ears turned red, she must’ve thought I needed help in the dating department, and she was probably right. “You’re a *handsome* man. Find yourself a wife!” she would always insist.

After lunch, I headed back to the station, and when I arrived, I could hear the Sheriff carrying on. Someone was in trouble. “You two are going to be shoveling the snow off my drive for the next *forty* years of your lives if

you vandalize Mrs. Labelle's gargoyle statue one more time. Do you hear me? You're lucky I don't-.."

I walked in to see two of our regular troublemakers sitting awkwardly in front of his desk. The boys were in their early teens, harmless really, and they looked suitably traumatized. We had seen them in a couple of times for other minor issues, but they weren't bad kids; they just needed some direction. Barrett was probably scaring the life out of them with his eyebrows knitted into a cross of fury like they were.

He cut off mid-sentence when he spotted me, "Charles! Where have you been? Do you know what time it is?!" he demanded, and I scrambled for an answer.

"I was having lunch with Mrs. Moore. She kept me back to remove some branches from the trail," I said quickly.

The younger of the two boys turned to look at me with wide eyes, "Aww, no! Please don't tell Mimi I was here!" he exclaimed.

"Well, if you didn't want her to find out, you shouldn't have painted the gargoyle," I answered with a 'there's nothing I can do to help you' shrug. The boy's name was Deion, and Mrs. Moore was his grandmother.

"Have you seen the thing? It's evil," he grumbled, slumping back down with his arms folded. I sympathized with him. The gargoyle that sat atop Mrs. Labelle's letter box *was* terrifying. Nonetheless, Barrett sentenced the boys to a week of picking up trash and general cleaning around the station while I slinked back to my desk, hoping my tardiness would be overlooked.

Unfortunately, when he was done with the kids, his attention returned to me. He didn't approach my desk. Rather he raised his voice to speak across the room at me, "Charles. We've been getting reports of some voodoo-type stuff that someone's set up in the woods. East trail. Go dismantle it. It's a public eye sore, and we can't have people thinking we've got a cult in the area." He instructed, sitting back in his chair with his arms folded.

I raised an eyebrow, "Do you think it's ahh-... You *know*..?" I questioned cautiously, already hating myself for even suggesting it.

The Sheriff looked distinctly displeased. "What nonsense are you talking about, boy? It's just some kids messing around in the woods to scare tourists," he said gruffly.

“Yeah, that’s probably right,” I agreed quickly, relieved, “Do you want me to get working on it now?”

“No, Charles, I mentioned it so that you could take it into account and relax for the rest of the afternoon,” he spoke calmly, surprising me with his relaxed attitude. Then he raised his voice, “*Of course I want you to go do it now!* Take the ATV and be quick about it.”

“Right, yes sir,” I hurried to gather my things and go. I thought it was unlike him; I should have known.

“Wait up, if it *is* ahh... *Something*, you come right back. I’ll call the specialist.” Barrett added as I was heading out the door. The low concern in his voice was enough to make me nervous.

“Got it,” I assured, trying not to betray how unsettled that made me as I headed out. I had worked with the ‘specialist’ twice before on cases that took an *unconventional* path to resolution. Both times were at least mildly traumatizing. I didn’t mind the man himself, but the implication that this could be something that we weren’t normally equipped to handle was deeply disturbing.

“And keep your radio on!” the Sheriff called after me.

I raised my hand to let him know I had heard and made my way to the ATV’s. There were a few good hours of daylight left, but I didn’t want to waste any time. Being out in the woods at night was not something I wanted to be doing again, and the specified trail was one of the longest. It headed east, up into the mountains, and was the path adventurers took when they wanted to do a full day’s trip or an overnight stay.

This time of year it was quiet, and making my way up the trail on the ATV was peaceful. Little birds darted between bare branches. The ground was damp, small puddles and mushy leaves lined the trail. We had already seen the first snow of the year, but it was little more than dirty slush at that stage, which meant that the ski season would begin in a few more weeks. I wasn’t looking forward to that.

The cold wouldn’t be so bad, but it meant that before long overconfident people would be flooding the park infirmary with sprained ankles and broken arms. We took turns helping out at the ranger's station last year. This year, however, I knew it would be all me. I allowed my thoughts to wander as my vehicle tires squelched on the muddy earth. For a time, I pondered on

how many injuries there would be and how I would best get people off the mountain. But gradually my daydreaming stretched to other thoughts.

My sister, Claire, would be coming around to stay with me soon. I live in the same town I always have. My parents live here too, although I do my best to avoid them, while Claire travels. She never announces herself, but I knew that one day soon, I would finish work to find her sitting on my doorstep with a suitcase, complaining about how long she had to wait in the cold for me to get home.

She's somewhat of a free spirit. Shameless, with high energy and questionable decision-making skills. But we get along well, and I'm always secretly a little sad to see her go. More often than not, she leaves the same way she arrives, spontaneously. Without a word of goodbye, I'll find a hastily scribbled note about how she's headed out to wherever next and will see me again in 'a while'. I don't know how she manages to take care of herself, but I would have to stock up the fridge on my way home.

My thoughts were interrupted when I came across two hikers, I recognized them as locals, and they greeted me with familiarity. I could tell by the look on their faces that they were deeply concerned about something, and they went on to explain that they had come across some occult ritual in the woods. If I'm honest, they looked quite shaken. I should have known that their inability to accurately describe what they had seen meant it was something bad.

They had been the ones to call in about the 'voodoo' in the woods. Apparently, it was in a clearing not too far ahead to the right. They had stayed to help guide me to the location, but it was clear that they were quite anxious to leave the area, and I'll admit that made me feel a little unsettled. They weren't the kind of people to spook easily, which was an ominous sign.

In general, I try not to think about the things I can't explain well, and, as I came across the clearing in question, I regretted that Eric hadn't been called right away. The nearby trees were stripped of all low-hanging branches, and the surrounding ambiance was ominous. I pulled into the clearing cautiously. From a distance, I could see that the grasses in the area were purposefully crushed down, creating a perfectly circular space among the trees.

In the center of this clearing were the still smoldering remains of a fire. Smoke rose from it slowly in wispy plumes. However, even as I approached, the forest showed no signs of danger. In the trees the birds sang carefree, and insects still chirped. I couldn’t tell if this was a good sign or not, and all the hair on the back of my neck was standing on end. The wildlife might not sense any danger, but I certainly did.

Taking a deep breath in, I tried to calm my nerves. There was nothing there, and no one was around. It was just a space in which people *had* once been, and they were no longer there, I told myself. Still, I entered the area with hesitance and approached the coals. Now that I was closer, I could see fragments of bone in the ashes. They were large pieces and I'm not an expert in anthropology, but the remains didn’t look to be human. I thought they might have been from a deer instead.

I tried hard to convince myself this was just some illegal hunter's idea of a spooky joke. Maybe even leftover Halloween decorations of some kind. I ignored the anxiety in my gut and pretended I didn’t notice the odd way in which everything was directed counterclockwise.

As I looked around, I noticed that there were small charms hanging in the trees. They were made of sticks and twine with small bones woven into each arrangement. I grimaced to myself; they reminded me of the hex I had found in May and were undoubtedly what the Sheriff wanted me to take down. I knew he would want me to make the area look ‘normal’ again, so I couldn’t just ignore them.

I set about my task reluctantly, taking each unusual object down and loading them into a garbage bag. I was relieved to find that they seemed to be made of plastic and common thread. They were props like those you buy at dollar stores, and that made me feel immensely better.

Of course, I still wasn’t sure what to do with these things once they were taken down. Obviously, I didn’t want to take them back with me, but I also didn’t know what else I was supposed to do with them. Bury them, maybe? Probably not. It wouldn’t look good for an officer to litter, I reprimanded myself. Because of this internal debate, I was distracted, and when I touched one absentmindedly it pricked me.

Surprised, I stared at it dumbfounded. I hadn’t realized it had thorns since the others didn’t. Blood ran freely down my hand and arm. It wasn’t a lot, but enough to stain my sleeve. I cursed myself for not being more

careful and looked over the object more thoroughly. This one was different from the others; made with real wood, blackened with a vine of thorns tangled into the design. In place of twine was what looked like human hair, and the bones had chunks of dehydrated flesh hanging off them. Instinctively I recoiled, dropping the thing.

I couldn't imagine what kind of person would make something like that, and I decided right then that this was more than kids messing around. This thing was *real*. With that realization, the atmosphere seemed to change subtly. The forest fell silent, and I felt nauseous. My vision blurred, and before I knew it, I was stumbling back to the ATV. I tried calling over the radio for help but couldn't get through.

My fingers slipped off the buttons as I tried to press them in, and I struggled to form coherent sentences as I tried to explain what had happened. I received no response. When I reached my vehicle, I went to grab hold of the handlebars, but they were doubled, and I missed repeatedly. It was frustrating. I could see the thing sitting there unmoving, yet I couldn't get a hold of it. Thinking back, I probably wouldn't have been able to drive it even if I had.

I realized the charm must have been poisoned, a trap for anyone who touched it, and I was that unfortunate person. I'm not sure when, or how, I fell. Gravity shifted, and I collapsed sideways to the ground. It didn't hurt, but I couldn't get up. I flailed helplessly on the forest floor; a dampness sank into my clothes, and I began to shiver.

That's when I first noticed it; a blackened figure with tattered clothing crawling along the leaf litter toward me. It came from the direction of the clearing, and I could see it coming for me through the gap under the ATV. Its dark shape contrasted unnaturally against the earthy tones of the forest, and it seemed horrifically out of place in the daylight.

I struggled more, trying to get up or at least to get away, but it was useless. Every effort I made was uncoordinated. My limbs wouldn't move in any useful way, and I fell back to the ground again. In desperation, I tried to unholster my gun, but I couldn't get the latch to undo, or maybe it was just that I couldn't remember how to do it. Regardless, I was painfully helpless. Blood rushed in my ears, and adrenaline pumped through me. It was like I was having a heart attack. I couldn't breathe.

There’s nothing I can say that will describe the terror that consumed me. My flight or fight response was trying to work, but my body was uncooperative. I can’t even say that I was frozen with fear. It was more just that I had no control over anything. The creature was by then upon me. It crawled up the length of my body, and its nails dug into my skin as it dragged itself over to be eye-level with me. It looked like a burned woman. She had no eyes, and her teeth hung loose from her jaw as she opened her mouth wide over me. A sticky black fluid poured from her mouth over my face. It felt like drowning all over again, and I had flashbacks of the Oklahoma incident.

***

I don’t know when I passed out. However, when I came too, it was dusk, and I was alone. The radio on my shoulder crackled, and Diane’s voice came through loud and clear. ‘Charles, calling *Charles*. Can you hear me?’ she asked, her tone caught between annoyance and concern. As if she had been trying to contact me for a while.

“I’m here,” I answered with a groan. My entire body ached. It was like getting hit by a truck and being unfortunate enough to live, barely.

‘Where have you been? Why didn’t you answer sooner!?’ she demanded now, any regard she may have had evaporating.

It took me a moment to recollect what happened, and I sat up a little too fast, causing my head to spin as I remembered the burned woman. There was no sign of her. Nor any indication that she had been there at all. No trace of black fluid and no footprints in the mud other than my own. I thought I must’ve hallucinated the entire thing. Feeling foolish, I didn’t want to tell Diane I had been passed out in the woods for however long, so I lied, “Sorry, I was cleaning up the clearing. I didn’t hear the radio.”

‘Not good enough, Charles,’ she scolded, but the relief in her voice was obvious, ‘Are you headed back in now? It’s almost dark, and the Sheriff isn’t happy.’

“When is he ever? I’m on my way back.” I knew by now as well as she did, that being on the trail at night was a situation to be avoided if at all possible. *Maybe I was getting a little superstitious after all*.

‘Good,’ Diane said in a final tone as I clambered back onto the ATV.

The way back took some time, and it was well and truly dark by the time I arrived. Barrett was, as promised, not very happy with me, “What did you do? Roll in the mud? Don’t stand on the carpets. They were just cleaned,” he said while looking me up and down.

I knew I was a mess. Dried mud was stuck to my uniform and hair. At least most of the leaves had blown off me on the way back. “Yes Sheriff,” I agreed easily, but I must have sounded more pitiful than I intended because his tone softened.

“Take the day off tomorrow, looks like you’ve had a rough day.”

“No, I’m fine. I can work tomorrow,” I insisted. I knew he wasn’t trying to punish me, but it felt like he was.

“I won’t hear a word about it. If you come in tomorrow, you’re fired. Take the day to recover,” he reiterated, and I realized arguing further was going to be pointless.

If I’m honest, I did feel off... Not sick, just exhausted and sore. All my joints hurt. I sanitized my mouth particularly well that night and scrubbed my face raw. By the time I got out of the shower, I felt mildly better, but I wasn’t sure that what I had experienced had happened. Where the charm had pricked me, I had a small red mark on my hand, but otherwise, I was physically unharmed. Psychologically however, maybe I was a tad more shaken than I’m willing to admit.

By the end of it all, I was more or less just waiting for something *else* to happen. I wanted to call Eric, but I didn’t want to waste his time. What could I even say? I *think* something supernatural happened to me, ‘please help’? I decided against it. He probably wouldn’t even answer anyway. Besides, worse things have happened to me than this, and there’s no reason to jump to any unnatural conclusions. The charm was most likely laced with hallucinogens, probably someone's sick idea of a joke.

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Chapter 13
We had to Call in the Specialist

Charles Walsh: November, 1998.

I don’t remember it. I don’t remember getting up, or navigating to the kitchen, and I most *definitely* do not recall taking a knife from the knife block. What I can recollect, however, is my pinkie toe bending at a right angle as I slammed it into the edge of the couch hard enough to wake myself up.

Pain radiated up my body, and the blade I had been holding clattered to the floor, narrowly missing my other foot. To say I was confused is an understatement. It took me a few moments to understand where I was and what had happened. I used to sleepwalk as a child but hadn’t in years. So while I was surprised it wasn’t exactly something that had never happened to me, though, I’ll concede I hadn’t sleep-carried around knives before.

After picking up the knife, I hobbled back to the kitchen. I intended to get a glass of water, put the knife back, and go back to bed. However, as soon as I entered the room, I realized that wasn’t going to happen. The area was a disaster zone. Half-emptied food containers were strewn across the bench, and leftovers I had carefully stored were now sitting half-eaten out in the air.

A carton of milk lay on its side. The milk flooded over the countertop and had puddled on the floor, splattering the entirety of the cupboards below as it did. Sleepy and annoyed, I was in no way ready to deal with this mess, but it wasn’t something I could just leave until morning. I set about cleaning up as I cursed myself. I couldn’t remember making the calamity before me, but I supposed I was hungry, and the sleepwalking was a result of that. I was probably lucky I didn’t chop my fingers off while trying to make a snack.

By the time I got things back in order, I had decided there was no point in trying to go back to sleep. Since I had the day off, I planned to make the most of it, get some chores out the way, go shopping, and maybe get a meal at the diner. The pinprick on my hand from the charm was bothering me slightly. Overnight it had become swollen and itchy. I supposed it must have

become infected or that the poison in the thorns was lingering, so I agreed with myself that the hospital would be my first stop.

I sat in the waiting room at the doctor's surgery for what felt like an eternity. I found myself falling into a kind of trance as I listened to the hum of the office fish tank. The gentle bubbling of the air stone was strangely irritating. The overhead lights seemed too bright, and the sound of other people in the waiting room merely breathing was too loud.

An uncomfortable anger was starting to burn in my veins, then a strange idea came to me. It manifested as a suggestion that passed through my mind as if someone had whispered it in my ear... *Shoot everyone.* The words were crystal clear. It felt like someone poured a bucket of ice water over me, and I took in a sharp breath in. The notion horrified me. I had no idea where that kind of violent thought came from.

Of course, I carry a weapon for work, but I had never found it necessary to fire it at another *human* person before, let alone ever considered shooting up a room full of innocent people. I cannot express the relief I had knowing I wasn't carrying on my day off. When my name was called, it was as if a bubble burst, and I realized I had been staring at the floor for some time.

"Sorry, that's me," I apologized; they must've called me more than once. I just hadn't heard.

"It's quite alright. What can I do for you today?" the doctor asked as we sat in his office. He was a well-built man, taller than I, with ginger hair and light eyes. I read on his tag that his name was Dr. Sean Dempsey.

"Well... I think this might be infected," I answered, offering him my hand so that he could see the puffy, reddened mark.

"Alright, let's have a look," he mused, taking my hand and examining it. "Does it hurt or itch? Can you close your hand?"

In response to his question, I opened and closed my hand, "I can, but it does hurt a little bit, and it is itchy."

"It's quite strange. It almost looks like you've been stamped or something. How did it happen?"

"Stamped?" I asked dumbly, examining it more closely. I hadn't scrutinized it that much, but I realized he was correct. It looked like I had hit something hard enough that it left the imprint of an object on my skin.

What kind of object makes a seven-pointed star shape on skin? I'm not sure. "I picked up a thing wrapped in thorns," I went on to explain.

"What kind of thorns?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Pointy ones?"

"Right. And how do you feel? Any fatigue, nausea, muscle weakness?" Dr. Dempsey quizzed me further, I could tell he was less than satisfied with my answer.

"I'm a bit tired, but that's just because I didn't sleep well last night. Otherwise, I'm fine. Some joint soreness, but that's just from work."

"What do you do for work?"

"I work at the Sheriff's Station, sometimes out at the Rangers Station too," I answered honestly, I couldn't see why that mattered, but the Doctor hesitated slightly.

"And you say it was an object wrapped in thorns that started this?" he asked to clarify.

"Yeah, I was taking down some Halloween decorations in the woods, just stuff kids put up," I explained vaguely.

"I see. There are a lot of unsavory plants out there. I'm going to write you a prescription for some light antibiotics. Take them once a day with food. You'll be fine," he assured, turning in his chair to start scribbling on the paper. I couldn't help but feel unnerved that he felt the need to tell me that I would 'be fine.' I wasn't previously worried that I wouldn't be.

Leaving the doctor's office, I picked up my new drugs and made my way to the local diner. Millie's Diner was situated on the corner between the road and the park at the end of the main street. It has a window that opens to the street for passers-by, booth-style seating inside, and extra tables on the sidewalk for outdoor seating. It's usually busy, and you can always smell the baked goods, even before crossing the street.

I chose to sit inside, in one of the booths and looked over the menu. Truth be told, I was a regular and almost always ordered the same thing: a coffee with one sugar, a juicy steak with eggs, mash, and a side of toast, which I was rather looking forward to.

"Charles, are you pretending to read the menu again?" I was called out almost immediately as the waitress came over to me. She was carrying the

day's newspaper and a mug of coffee with her. Her name was Jessica. She had been the year above me in high school, and when she smiled, her cheeks held small dimples.

Her hair was a wavy dark brown, long, and tied into a high ponytail as it always was when she worked. Her eyes were a deep brown, and she wore a white apron with a strawberry pattern. That wasn't part of the cafe uniform, but I suppose you can wear what you like when your father is the owner.

"That obvious?" I asked, embarrassed with a sheepish grin.

"The usual then?" Jess returned the smile warmly as she set down the coffee and paper for me. I realized then that she must've anticipated and made it the minute I walked in. She also didn't have to bring the newspaper, but she knew I liked reading it, so she often brought it over.

"That would be great, thanks," I agreed, my ears turning flush. There was no way to thank her enough for the kindness.

"Coming right up!" she assured, turning on her heels to leave. I watched her go and lamented on the fact that I hadn't been brave enough to speak to her in high school before turning my attention to the newspaper.

I was about a quarter of the way through the first article, and deep in thought, when someone silently slid into the seat opposite me. I can't say that I noticed him until he spoke. It was as if he simply appeared in the space before me.

"Do you always turn so red when pretty girls speak with you?"

I flinched involuntarily as I startled. Across from me sat Eric Linnaeus. I recognized the voice instantly and was surprised to see him in casual dress. He wore a white top under an open wool jacket with a high collar. As always, the right-hand sleeve was empty, with his arm wrapped and slung across his body.

Instead of being combed back, his dark hair hung forward, covering his right eye. It's strange to say, but he looked almost angelic without his darkened eye immediately visible, and I had never before noticed just how ocean blue his left eye was. He set his cane beside him and let it rest leaning against the table.

"Have you ever considered wearing a cat bell? You know, so you don't give people heart attacks." I muttered in return, ignoring his question entirely.

“If you were paying more attention to your surroundings, I wouldn’t have startled you.”

“I was reading! That’s perfectly reasonable.”

“If you say so,” he shrugged, but I got the feeling he was somehow amused.

“What are you doing here?” I grumbled, dejected. The mark on my hand had begun to ache since he had sat down.

Looking him up and down, Eric seemed well. Despite his right arm being bandaged, as it always was, it appeared to be okay. The damage from Oklahoma was healed, and he was healthy. However, I couldn’t help but feel anxious seeing him. I hadn’t gotten around to calling him, and I was beginning to realize that part of me was worried, but about what exactly? I couldn’t precisely say.

“Your Sheriff called me, and given how much the man hates me, I supposed it was important. He’s worried about you,” Eric said calmly. His gaze came to rest on me, as if he was analyzing something, and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

“I’m fine. Some kids put up Halloween decorations in the woods. Sheriff had me take them down. It’s not a big issue. He gave me the day off today, but I’m fine,” I assured.

“May I see your hand?”

He held out his left hand for mine and I hesitated; I hadn’t told him my hand was injured. Subconsciously I had even been directing it away from him, so how did he know? Did the Sheriff tell him? I’m not sure why it bothered me. I didn’t want him to look at it or touch it.

A tense moment of silence passed between us before Eric spoke once more. “I’m not going to ask you again.” His voice held no agitation; however, he articulated the words firmly, and I understood he wasn’t making a request.

I swallowed, “Sorry. It’s fine, really. I have meds for it,” I tried as I reluctantly offered my limb.

Eric didn’t say anything further as he looked over my hand. I’m a little ashamed to say that I thought his hand would be *inhuman*, in some way or another. Cold or something, but it wasn’t. It was as normal as anyone else’s.

He examined the mark for a long moment; it had darkened over the course of the day, with the lines of the star shape becoming more pronounced.

He ran his thumb over it lightly, and I winced. A searing pain radiated through my fingertips and up the length of my arm. It hadn't hurt like that when the Doctor looked it over, and I realized that it was reacting specifically to Eric, as if his touch somehow made the mark angry.

"You can breathe, Charles," he reminded me without emotion as he took his hand back from mine. There was shame in the pit of my stomach. I'm sure he felt my hesitation to touch his hand, "Tell me, what did the cursed object look like?"

"Cursed object?" I echoed, confused.

"The 'Halloween decorations'," he clarified.

"Oh… They were circular, just made of plastic and thread," I elaborated minimally.

"Charles," he sighed with a hint of annoyance; he knew I was being deliberately vague. I don't know why I was so nervous; this man had risked his life for mine twice, and I trusted him. Or at least, I thought I did.

"Someone must've gone the extra mile for their make-believe seance, one of the decorations was... A bit more, *realistic* than the rest," I admitted unwillingly.

"I'm going to assume it was this 'realistic' one that cut your hand? Did you *see* anything after it tasted your blood? Has anything *unusual* happened since?"

I swallowed anxiously. My lips were dry, and the way he said it had *'tasted my blood'* was disturbing. I was about to answer him honestly when the word came to me. *Lie*. It was clear and compelling. I contemplated it a moment longer before replying, "No…" I murmured weakly, "No, I didn't see anything. Nothing strange has happened; it's all very normal," I lied more confidently.

Whatever his thoughts, Eric's expression betrayed nothing, and I couldn't tell if he believed me or not. I thought he would answer me when Jess returned to the table. I realized then that he must have seen her coming and decided to wait before saying anything more. She set down my plate and cutlery, then turned to Eric with a sorry expression.

She was apologizing to him, saying how she assumed I was dining alone and asking if she could get him something. He declined politely, but in truth, I couldn't hear the words properly, for another thought entered my mind... *Kill Him. Do it now!* The words were icy, I don't know where they came from, but I broke into a cold sweat.

Somewhere in my mind I was aware that I had taken hold of the steak knife that came with the meal. I was gripping it so tightly that my knuckles had turned white. *Kill Him*. The suggestion came again more firmly, and I struggled to ignore it. The compulsion was so strong that I could see how to do it. *Stab him with the knife, catch him by surprise.…*

"Charles," Eric's voice was low and calm. It broke through whatever spell was over me. Jess had walked away at some point while I was consumed with my thoughts, and all of Eric's attention was now focused on me. I let go of the knife, it clanked loudly off the table to the floor, but I made no move to retrieve it. I was trembling with adrenaline, and when I dared look back up at Eric he was tense.

His hair was now pushed aside slightly, and his right eye was locked on me. A chill ran down my spine. It was the eye of a predator, and he was ready to attack. I was sure this was the way he looked at the things he killed. I thought for one delirious moment that he could somehow see my thoughts, that he knew what I was thinking and was ready to end me.

He watched me for a long moment before he seemed to relax, "I wasn't going to hurt you. I'm *not* going to hurt you. I was only going to stop you if necessary..."

I must have looked afraid because he spoke more softly to me then and smoothed his hair back over his right eye. "However," he continued, "I do want to know what happened just then. What did you hear?"

"I…" I struggled to begin. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or the violence of the thought, or the shame, "N-Nothing, I-.. I was just… daydreaming is all." I decided not to tell him that I considered murdering him in broad daylight, just in case he changed his mind.

"Look at me," Eric ordered, and I reluctantly met his gaze, "I can't help you if you keep lying to me."

In response to his words, I heard the voice clearly in my mind again... *He's going to kill you.* I felt sick. Panic was bubbling up in my chest. It was

hard to breathe, and I imagined everyone was staring at me. “I have to go,” I told him quickly and got up to leave. I fled Millie’s without eating, and I don’t know if Eric followed or not as I walked hastily to my truck.

Outside, the cool air helped calm my nerves. I hadn’t realized until then how warm it was in the diner. It was like I was burning up from the inside out; they must have had the heaters up too high, I rationalized. I drove with no destination in mind and without any specific direction. I just wanted to get away.

I rolled the windows down and turned the radio up to drown out my thoughts. It didn’t help much. The mark on my palm burned, and the same notion played in my mind repeatedly: *Kill him, kill him, KILL HIM!* It was hysterical, not like it was before. Previously it had been a whisper, a suggestion. Now it was like a toddler throwing a tantrum after their parents had denied them candy.

Some of me knew it wanted Eric dead because he threatened it. But I also understood that if this voice was now a part of me, and if it compelled me to try to kill him... He would destroy me. I didn’t know what to do, but I found an undefined sense of dread thinking about it. I had to get rid of the mark and its curse on my own. Only, I had no idea how to do that. I couldn’t even bring myself to accept what it was or that it was happening to me.

After some time, the voice began to subside. Although I’m sure it was only because it had run out of energy to keep screaming at me, and I found myself traveling along a seldom-used service road in silence. I recognized it because it was the one that traveled alongside the park. I’d used it last year to evacuate some hikers when a small brush fire came through.

I continued along it until my car made the sad sounds of a vehicle running out of gas; filling it should have been on my list for the day, but I hadn’t expected to drive for so long. I pulled to a stop in the middle of the trail and, just, *sat* in my car for a long time. Deciding what to do next was the hardest part. The car wasn’t going to make it back, and my cell phone, for the brick it was at the time, had no reception.

The idea that I might be spending the night in the woods didn’t bother me especially. *What more was in those woods that could scare me now?* Still, I decided that I would go for a walk to try and find some signal. I

picked the direction that led to the nearest hill and set off into the forest, making my own path.

As it would turn out, I was wrong about the forest. It did bother me, for it was entirely silent. The foliage varied in density so that sometimes I could walk between the trees freely while other times I had to push my way clumsily through the undergrowth. Before long, the daylight faded, and the woods seemed to come alive.

I became certain that there were *things* following after me. Creatures hidden among the elongated shadows of the trees, watching as I made the decision to return to the car and abandon my mission for signal. However, it was when I turned back that I saw her. The burned woman. Crawling out of the trees toward me on bent limbs and slowly beginning to stand upright.

This time I had the good sense to run.

She shrieked after me, but I didn't look back. I ran like a track star through those woods, vaulting over logs and ducking under branches. Part of me knew it was pointless. I had nowhere to go. I was marked, and I regretted leaving my gun at home. Not that I truly believed it would have been of any help in this situation.

Stop.

The command came, and I seized up. A fresh wave of panic consumed me. I understood that now that she was close, she could control me more easily, and I fought for my autonomy back. My limbs twisted unnaturally against my will, bending in ways joints weren't made to bend, and before long I was writhing on the ground in agony.

I heard my shoulder dislocate as the entity willed it to happen, and I shouted in pain. She was punishing me for running. From my vantage point in the mud, I watched as she approached. She moved slowly, and that was somehow worse. Every step she took was disjointed.

When she reached me, she crouched down and stroked the side of my face with her hand, she opened her mouth as if she was talking, and the words came to me: *Young. Handsome*. Somehow the compliments didn't hit the mark. Her skin was made of shriveled back peels, the same as when a heat source is held close to plastic, and each layer melts back individually. She smelled of charred flesh.

As my anxiety rose I tried to force my body to move, but I had no control left. She took my marked hand in her hands and pressed it to her face; she seemed pleased in a repulsive way. *Mine*. I shuddered involuntarily. Then the worst thing I had ever experienced happened.

The burned woman began to pick at the flesh of my hand. She was peeling back the raised strips of the skin around the mark in my palm and dribbling black fluid from her mouth into the wound. I could feel her flowing? Into my body through the mark. That's not accurate, but I have no better way to describe it. She was infesting my body with her very being.

It felt like boiled water was being injected through my veins. The pain was excruciating, much worse than what I had experienced in Oklahoma. Mercifully, the entire process didn't take long. As her physical manifestation disappeared, I could feel her will being imposed on my body and my own conscious thoughts being suppressed. It was unnatural, unholy, violating in every sense of the word as my limbs moved under her direction.

I..? She..? *We*. Stood, and she forced me to walk forward. I could feel her emotions; she was pleased, ecstatic. I supposed she wanted a whole body again, and now she had mine. Our focus landed on a circular arrangement of twigs not too far from us, where the sounds of young birds moving nervously in the nest originated. *Food.* We thought, and I understood that she wanted to eat. She was going to make us eat those birds alive, and I knew it.

My unfiltered terror pleased her, and my lips pulled themselves into a smile. Thankfully, we didn't take more than a single step toward those birds before I felt a jolt of sudden malice mixed with nervousness. For a moment, I couldn't think what would make this thing anxious. Then I saw it.

Nearing us from the left was a dark shape. Through the Witch's eyes over my own, I could see the form of a human wrapped in a writhing mass of dusky energy. It approached through the darkness, and as the figure stepped out of the trees into the clearing with us the moonlight hit him. I realized then that it was Eric.

The energy flickered around him like a flame, casting blue sparks into the night air. It covered him entirely, but it was primarily focused around the upper right-hand side of his body. I noticed it was a translucent gray, or maybe a blue turned gray in the darkness. I couldn't tell. The energy almost seemed to shimmer when he stepped out of the shadow. It was… oddly

beautiful, and I'm sure my human eyes would never have been able to see it on their own.

In addition to the peculiar energy surrounding him, Eric's right eye was strangely bright. It reflected back at us like a mountain cat's eye in the shine of a flashlight. He stretched out his inhuman arm, and the claws extended. I felt a doubled wave of fear flood through me; it was both mine and the burned woman's. We knew he was there to kill us.

"I'm sorry," Eric spoke softly. His gaze rested on us, as if he was looking through the Witch to talk to me directly. I wanted to answer him, to tell him it was okay. But she disallowed me to speak. Her energy started to swell, it was like bile rising, and I could tell we were about to attack him.

Before I knew it was happening, she launched us at him. The magic that leaked out of me from her burned the ground where Eric once stood, but he had already moved. *He's too fast,* I thought, remembering his speed every other time I had seen him fight, and I experienced her resentment at that information. That was almost pleasing.

The fight didn't last long. We were, in fact, severely outpowered. The one-time Eric didn't move aside, he caught my arm by the wrist in his right hand, and his magic smothered ours. His claws cut into my skin without any pressure at all, and blood ran freely down my arm.

In moments he had us pinned to the ground. I should probably, at this point, mention that I'm just over 6ft tall and, while Eric is about 5'9", but his weight on my chest was crushing me. I'm sure he was unnaturally heavy. *He's probably made of stone or something*, I thought. I closed my eyes, and the Witch allowed me to do so. I guess she didn't want to see us die either.

As I waited, his claws were at my throat and knew that soon I would be dead. At least I would die without eating any raw baby birds. Then, to my shock, Eric spoke. "Leave. Him," he demanded, the anger in his voice was vicious. I opened my eyes and was surprised to see his face scrunched into an expression of pure fury. I don't think I have ever seen anyone look so mad, let alone Eric, whose emotional range had previously been limited to the slightest hints of amusement.

There was a momentary pause from the entity. I felt her confusion and then her understanding as she took the opportunity. Immediately her

presence receded from my body. She left the same way she entered, through the curse on my palm. I can't say it was any less painful leaving as she was entering, but it was, at least, a relief.

I didn't see where she went after she left my body. However, as the last of her existence left, I expected that Eric would allow me up. He didn't. Instead, he stabbed a knife into the sleeve of my shirt, skewering my left arm to the ground, and readjusted to hold my right arm down.

"What are you..-" The words died on my lips as I understood. He was restraining me now because he was going to cut off my hand, "No! Eric!" I protested urgently, "Please!" I know it's stupid, but I would rather be fully dead than an amputee. I couldn't imagine living without my right hand.

"Shut up," he snapped. I couldn't see what he was doing but felt him weaving threads over my hand. A burning sensation spread in my palm, not dissimilar to that of when the Witch possessed me. Only this time, the pain was localized. It felt like he was pulling the nerves out, and I screamed in agony.

When it was done, he threw something away. It landed with a wet slop on the leaves somewhere in the near distance, and I realized tentatively that my hand was, in fact, still intact. "You're a fucking idiot, Charles," he scolded me. I didn't know what to say. Without the Witch's eyes Eric looked quite normal in the moonlight, and his expression changed from anger to relief.

We stared at each other for an awkward moment before we both seemed to realize that he was *still* sitting on top of me, holding me down with one hand on my chest and the other on my wrist. He looked almost as surprised at this revelation as I did and let me up. I didn't try to get up immediately, my shoulder wasn't in any good way, and blood poured freely from the injuries to my hand.

"I can bandage you, but we need to get you back," he was visually examining my injuries as he answered.

"Okay, just, give me a minute," I agreed. Eric didn't look pleased, but he accepted my response as he set about bandaging my wrist and hand. I noticed that the way he held the fingers on his right hand was almost uncomfortable looking. He was making an effort not to touch anything with

the claws. I supposed they were sharp enough to cut through fabric and flesh without much pressure.

“Not a word. I don’t want to hear a single word,” he said firmly, catching me watching him.

I hesitated, “Two words then. *Thank you*…” I murmured. I wasn’t going to miss the opportunity again.

At this, he seemed genuinely embarrassed, “Never say that again.”

“You just saved my life for a third time. I owe you two other thanks as well.”

“Maybe next time, just don’t touch cursed objects.”

“I didn’t know it was cursed. The rest weren’t…” I muttered. I knew I had messed up. I could have hurt someone, and I nearly crushed some helpless birds.

Eric watched me for a moment, then seemed to take pity and chastised me playfully, “You touched *more* than one? Didn’t you learn your lesson about touching things in Oklahoma?”

“You’re kind of a bastard; you know that?” I grumbled.

“So I’ve been told,” he mused with a slight smile.

I hate to admit it, but that actually made me feel better. His teasing was reassuring. It made me feel like he knew what he was doing and that I was going to be alright after this. There was another deliberate silence before I gathered the courage to speak again, “...Can I ask you something?”

“That depends.”

“When she, it... was inside of me, I could see what she saw…” I began.

Eric tensed, “And?” he stated dryly, his emotions returning to the carefully maintained facade. I could tell he didn’t want to talk about it.

“...There’s an energy around you.” I didn’t quite know how to word what I wanted to ask.

“There’s an energy around everything.”

“...But yours is- well, I mean, it’s not...” I fumbled, “It’s not *really* human, is it? You’re not *truly.*…” I trailed off, and Eric turned away from me. He didn’t show any emotion, but I got the distinct feeling that I had hurt him in some way.

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly before turning back to me. “You need to get up now. It’s time to go,” he spoke calmly, ignoring my question altogether as he offered me his human arm to help me up.

“Eric, I don’t mean- What I’m trying to say is-.. I know, and it’s okay.” I was awkward trying to articulate myself as I accepted his help.

“Stop talking,” he told me firmly, making it clear that he wouldn’t elaborate, “I have more work to do here. The only way to kill a thing like that is if it’s in the body of someone, or to find whoever cast the original curse. The witch is still out there, and you need medical attention. We’ve done enough for tonight.”

Understanding dawned on me. He had allowed the burned woman to get away in order to spare my life. That meant it was still out there, and it was still dangerous. The Sheriff would probably kill me if he knew I was the reason there was still a witch in our woods.

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Chapter 14
I’ve Been Placed on Leave

Charles Walsh: November, 1998.

“God. Damn it!” I shouted in frustration as paperwork fell clean out the bottom of the folder and fluttered to the floor, scattering in all directions. I glared at the papers ruefully. It had been only a couple of days since the Witch's attack, and as it had turned out, I was a little worse for wear. My left arm had been dislocated severely, and there was a decent hole in my hand from where Eric had removed the curse mark.

As a result, my left arm would be in a sling until the end of the week, and my right hand was bandaged up tightly. Which made even simple tasks difficult, so I knew it would be nearly impossible for me to pick up the paperwork. I decided to ignore it for the time being, rather than try and awkwardly scrape them back into a pile.

You see, I was placed on night duty after the incident. This meant I would spend my nights alone in the station with little more to do than twiddle my thumbs. If any problems arose, I was to call a larger station in the next town over to come resolve it, but I still tried to spend my time productively. I focused on writing out reports and filing documents.

I was about to head back to my desk when there was a soft knocking, and I looked over to see Eric standing in the darkness on the other side of the glass entryway doors. I moved to unlock it for him, and he entered. He looked fatigued, and his clothing was slightly dampened from the weather outside.

“You’re earlier than usual,” I commented, glancing at the clock to see it was only nearing 3 a.m. For the past two nights, Eric had taken to patrolling the forest, and he usually didn’t return to the station until five or six in the morning.

“It’s quiet out there. It’s never a good thing when it’s quiet like this,” he sighed as he sat heavily on the couch in the visitors' area. Running a hand through his hair he closed his eyes for a moment. He must’ve been tired. He was out in the forest for the entirety of my shift the previous night, and the

Sheriff had complained earlier about him being around during the day as well.

It only occurred to me then that he was probably out there day and night, “Have you slept in the last two days?” I asked, raising my eyebrow.

“That’s not important right now, and the spirit is still looking for a host. She'll take someone if she senses I’ve left the area,” he explained, then opened his eyes again quickly to examine me as if he had forgotten to do so before. “How are your injuries?”

“They’re fine,” I assured, but his gaze moved to the pile of documents on the floor pointedly.

“I see, and you just felt like throwing paperwork to the ground in joy?”

Dejected, I ignored his question, “What happens if she can’t find a new host? I think you should try and get some sleep.” I regretted sounding like my mother.

He seemed to think before speaking again, “Spirits... Take a risk crossing the barrier. Typically, they only do so when called; presumably, whoever summoned her should know she needs a host. It’s… *odd*, that they didn’t have a host for her already. No sacrifice waiting. If she can’t find a host again before she runs out of energy, she will cease to exist.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I queried.

At this, Eric looked amused, as if I was missing something, “She wants to live just as much as you or I. Every creature with the will to live has survival instincts, and as she becomes more desperate, she will become more dangerous. I hope you realize you are still her ideal target,” he informed me casually.

A fresh wave of unease rolled over me, “I thought you removed the curse?”

“I did,” he assured, “However, you’re still the easiest choice for her; she knows you. She’s familiar with your energy. Removing the curse made it more difficult for her to find you, but you shouldn’t let your guard down. The curse was like a key of sorts, but even without a key; she can still break in.”

His words hit a newly found anxiety, and I stepped back, reaching for a chair to sit down on as I did. I was almost certain I was going to faint. The

idea that she might come for me, that I would hear her voice in my head again and feel her will imposed over my own brought back a fear I wished I had never known.

“Don’t look so worried, Charles. I’ll handle it,” Eric said confidently. “Can you pass me my cane?”

“I thought you said you didn’t need it for more than show?” I asked, curious. I had assumed he wouldn’t feel the need to keep up appearances with me anymore since he didn’t even keep his arm bandaged now.

“Today I need it. I’ve overextended myself slightly.”

“Oh, right,” I didn’t fully understand, but I got him his cane. “Diane should be here any minute. I can ask for an early minute so we can go?”

“You’re pretty useless here anyway. I doubt she’ll mind,” he mused, and I felt a twinge of embarrassment.

As he predicted, Diane was only too happy to allow me to go early. I think she just wanted Eric to leave. The Sheriff had driven me into work the day before since it was difficult for me to drive as I was, and Eric offered to drive me home since he would be staying with me anyway. His car was ancient. A 1929 Mercedes, he told me. It was a shiny black thing with white wall tires and a badge that said ‘Nürburg’. At first, I doubted it was even drivable, but it quickly became apparent that it had been modified somewhat over the years as the engine certainly wasn’t from the 1930s.

“Did you steal this from a museum?” I joked. The interior was leather, but the seats were an odd shape. No headrests.

“...Not from a museum,” he stated after a small hesitation.

It took me a moment to fully understand, “You know I’m an officer of the law, right?”

“So arrest me,” he said calmly, and I closed my mouth. This was going to be one of those things I chose to ignore.

When we arrived at my apartment, my neighbor, Mrs. Jones, was out watering her garden as the sun was beginning to rise. She watched us with displeasure as we went inside, scowling down her nose at me. I’m not sure why she disliked me so much. My apartment was on the ground level, with two bedrooms and one bath. Nothing special. I had cleaned up a little bit, but it still didn’t look great.

“Bathroom is down the hall. You can use the guest bed. I’ll make us some dinner,” I announced.

“Thank you,” he answered politely, his expression giving away none of his thoughts as he moved to go shower.

I set about struggling to cook some steaks and vegetables, I couldn’t lift the heavy iron skillet well, but I made do. As promised, Eric wasn’t gone long. He returned in black boxers with a towel half draped over his shoulders. He used it to dry his hair with his left hand while his right hand was awkwardly held away. Now, I know I agreed that I would ignore certain things when it came to him, but I couldn’t help myself.

Taking the opportunity to conspicuously look him over, I noticed his skin was remarkably unblemished. I don’t know why I had assumed that fighting the kinds of things he did, he would have scars. He didn’t. The discoloration on his arm ended just above his elbow, where it faded into his ordinary skin, and the silver marks on his neck just below the jawline were oddly bright. I think I can be forgiven for thinking they glowed slightly.

Around his neck he wore a silver chain with a delicate pendant, it looked like a woman’s necklace, but I didn’t ask about it. He had his back turned to me as he started pulling on a shirt, and I noticed he was also remarkably well-defined. One of those guys whose veins show in their arms slightly when they pick things up. He seemed to struggle to get his monster arm through the shirt sleeve without cutting the fabric, and he cursed softly. Then I remembered his left leg.

I had always been curious about what injury it may have had, and I had never seen him before without pants on, so it had always been covered prior. I was simultaneously disappointed and intrigued to see that from his hip down the length of his leg was a neat line of what I assumed were tattoos. They seemed to be a series of circles, crescents, and stars interwoven with runes. The ones from his ankle up to his thigh were empty outlines, while the ones higher near his hip appeared filled.

When he moved to put his jeans back on, I realized that I had been staring too long at the symbols and turned back to the food. “Hey Eric, what’s your routine?” I inquired.

“Excuse me?” he asked, confused.

“You’re ripped. What’s your workout routine?” I clarified as I plated up. He seemed to contemplate what I was saying momentarily, and his cheeks heated faintly in embarrassment as he understood the compliment.

“Oh, I spar a lot,” he answered blandly, “I believe I told you not to stare at me?”

“I wasn’t staring. I was just looking. I mean, n-not *‘looking’* just-.. I have eyes?” I struggled to find an excuse for my curiosity. Honestly, I don’t know what came over me.

He didn’t answer as we sat down for dinner. I gave him his plate and began struggling to cut through my steak like a savage. Juice leaked out of it, and I knew I had cooked them perfectly. However, that’s when I noticed Eric seemed to flinch, and I realized he was watching me.

“I’m fine. I can cut it,” I assumed he was worried I was incapable with my injuries.

“It’s not that.”

“What is it then? Are you alright?”

“It’s nothing, but I would prefer cereal.”

“Oh, in the pantry,” I said easily, and he got up quickly. I wondered if he had some kind of problem with meat? I felt a little dumb for not considering that he might not eat the same things I did. I wasn’t entirely sure what monster people liked to eat, but I had assumed meat; *maybe I shouldn’t have cooked it?*

The morning drew on, and Eric took some time to place salt across all the entryways into the house. I didn’t ask why; I knew better at that point. However, as I was about to go to bed, there was an energetic crash out the front.

Immediately Eric was tense and moved to investigate.

“Wait, it’s okay; it’s just my sister,” I assured quickly. Her enthusiasm was hard to mistake as she bashed on the door.

“Charles, *CHARLIE!* Are you home?” she called, trying to look through the frosted glass of the front door.

“Sister?” Eric echoed, confused.

“Yeah, her name is Claire,” I said as I moved to open the door.

“Don’t-” he started, but it was too late. With the door open less than a crack, my sister pushed her way in. Dragging a suitcase behind her, she let it go before leaping onto me to wrap me up in a hug.

I winced, “Ow ow ow, Claire…”

She noticed then that I was bandaged and immediately looked apologetic. “Oh, I’m sorry, *so* sorry, are you alright?” she contained her energy quickly, realizing it was too much for the situation.

“I’m okay, I was just about to go to bed, night shift,” I explained.

“Oh, I’ll have to be quiet then,” she said, understanding. Then she saw Eric for the first time and her expression changed from curious to embarrassed. “Charles... There’s a very attractive man standing in your living room, and you have just let me make a fool of myself. But I want you to know I support you one hundred percent!”

I looked back to Eric, who was by then covering his face with his hand. I was sure he must have hated his job at that particular moment. Feeling awkward, I turned back to my sister and wondered briefly how exactly my life had gotten to this point.

“Claire, no, that’s not right-” I tried.

“I won’t ask any questions, I swear,” she assured, putting her hands up.

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To say it was a long day is putting it lightly. My sister did not, in fact, remain quiet, and neither Eric nor I got much sleep with her in the house clattering around. She was determined to host a Thanksgiving dinner at my house in the coming days, and so was preparing. In addition to this, the small emotions I had noticed in Eric evaporated, and I wondered if I was previously able to recognize them because he was comfortable around me.

As evening approached, Eric and I headed to the station for my next shift, “I’m sorry, my sister is, ah... ‘high energy.’”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“I know, but she’s... Sometimes she has no filter when she says things. She’s great, really, it was just her and I growing up. We don’t get along well with our parents, so she’s kind of my entire family,” I explained, before asking curiously, “Do you have any family?”

At this, he hesitated, “In a roundabout way, I suppose I do. Though I haven’t seen them for some time.”

“Oh, I’m sorry…”

“It’s fine,” he dismissed me.

“If you want, you’re welcome to stay for Thanksgiving.” I offered, which seemed to catch him by surprise. “You don’t have to, but my sister and I would like it if you did,” I clarified.

“I’ll think about it,” he stated noncommittally, then put his left hand out to stop me flying forward as he slammed on the car brakes. He saw it before I did, a figure standing just ahead of the headlights. My heart began to race as I watched it shamble back out of the light, but Eric didn’t seem concerned as he pulled the car forward slowly until we were level with the thing.

I could tell then that it was a man dressed in a suit standing on the edge of the forest. His mannerisms were strange, and he seemed to recognize Eric with a caution that kept him from coming closer. I also noticed that his eyes were entirely white without pupils.

“Why are you here?” Eric demanded. No answer that I heard came, but he continued as if one had, “That’s not important. Answer the question.” Another pause, seemingly without response, “I would hope I don’t have to remind you of what is acceptable to hunt and what is not.” His voice was colder now, “If you’re going to have a conversation, you had better include everyone.”

‘As you wish,’ a male voice came to mind. It was distant sounding and deeply disturbing, not quite the same as the Witch, but similar, ‘There are witches in this area; bit dangerous for you, isn’t it? Does Nathaniel approve of you being here?’

“It doesn’t matter what he approves of,” Eric muttered, oddly annoyed by the comment.

‘You should know he requests that you come to see him. He says it has been too long.’

“*Requests*? or *commands*?” he clarified tensely, subtly raising his hand to the crescents on his neck.

The man on the road smiled broadly. ‘Just a *request*, for now,’ the voice exaggerated the ‘s’ in *request*, then turned his attention to me. ‘When I see him next, I will be sure to tell him of your new, *friend*.’ It was like I had just been looked up and down.

With this information, Eric gave a short, humorless laugh, “You won’t tell Nathaniel anything. It’s obvious you haven’t seen him for some time. But that’s hardly surprising; he wouldn’t waste his breath talking to the likes of you.”

The man sneered, ‘Always the favorite, weren’t you?’

“Yes,” Eric answered simply as he put the car back in gear to drive off.

“What *was* that?” I asked anxiously, looking back to see that the thing still stood where we had left him.

“A parasite,” he explained vaguely, “He won’t hunt humans in this area, so there’s no need to be concerned. He’s little more than an inconvenience.”

“What did it mean when he said witches are too dangerous for you? I can’t imagine anything that’s beyond what you can handle.”

Eric seemed amused, “There are plenty of things I can’t handle. This witch isn’t one of them. I don’t know what it is, but she’s not strong. I can sense it.”

“You think she’s injured or something?” I asked now unsurely.

“I don’t know,” Eric replied honestly as we arrived at the station. “I won’t be far.”

I knew that meant he wasn’t coming inside.

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The night passed slowly and without incident. As dawn approached, Eric returned to collect me from the station then we decided to go to Millie’s for breakfast. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t disappointed to note Jess wasn’t on shift, but I was interested to see that Eric ordered pancakes. We sat in silence for a long time before I finally spoke up, “So, you’ll eat pancakes, but not steak?” I asked, waving my fork at him accusatorily.

“Charles,” he warned without looking up at me, and I knew I had hit a weak point.

“Why is that exactly?” I continued being cheeky.

“Pick another subject.”

“Alright,” I agreed, eating a spoonful of the ice cream that came with the waffles I had ordered before enquiring, “Who’s ‘Nathaniel’?” I asked, and Eric choked.

“Since when did you decide you could interrogate me?” he muttered.

“I’m not interrogating you. I’m just asking questions-” I assured, but stopped when I noticed Eric’s attention fixate on the shop entry. Confused, I turned in the booth to look back at the door. A father and daughter had just entered, and I recognized the man, Dr. Dempsey, “Is something wrong?” I asked unsurely.

“Do you know them?” Eric asked quietly.

“That’s my doctor. I went to see him when I got the curse mark, and I assume, the girl is his daughter.” I explained, speaking quieter when he did. They looked similar, both with red hair and light eyes, so it was an easy connection to make. As I watched, Dr. Dempsey’s eyes came to rest on me, and a chill ran down my spine. It didn’t seem like *he* was looking at me. Rather, something *else* disturbingly familiar was.

I didn’t have the time to say what I thought before the man attacked. He rushed at us, and Eric was gone from the booth before I could even determine what was happening. The Doctor’s fist came down hard on the empty space, breaking off the corner of the table with the force of the impact, and from then it was pure chaos. Other customers screamed, and in a panic, everyone tried to cram themselves out the doorway.

“The girl is the witch!” Eric told me as the big man recovered from his initial missed attack and turned back to challenge him again. I’m not sure what he wanted me to do with that information. I was just a man with a fork and a half-eaten plate of waffles. “Charles don’t let her make that circle!” he clarified, and I realized that the man’s daughter was drawing a pentagram on the linoleum with her own blood.

I hurried to try and stop her, but frankly, I had no idea what to do. They don’t teach you how to interrupt a witch’s seance in the yearly retraining. So I ended up more or less bear-hugging her, and then scooping her off the floor so she couldn’t continue drawing. In response, the sixteen-year-old screamed and bit me. She thrashed wildly and kicked off the countertop

with her feet. The momentum knocked us both backward and I landed taking the brunt of the force for both of us. Hitting my head and injured shoulder in the process. One of them made a sickening crack that I knew wasn't good, I'm not sure which it was.

Dazed, I rolled in agony as the teen sprung up. I knew she was going right back to her pentagram, but as I struggled to recover, it was too late. I didn't know what would happen until it had begun. She completed the symbol, and the entire coffee shop began to vibrate. Mr. Dempsey stepped away from Eric, returning to his daughter's side with a wide smile. I could recognize the spirit that had infected me within him, and it made me shudder.

Eric returned to my side and urged me to get up. "You need to leave Charles, right now," he stated firmly.

"What's happening?" I asked numbly instead.

"I don't know; she's summoned something *else*. There's only one way this ends now. The caster has to die to break all of the summons. You don't want to see it," he told me calmly, his expression was cold. I realized then that this was his true job, to take care of things no matter how unpleasant the resolution was.

"You can't just kill a teenage girl," I protested.

"She's not a teenage girl anymore. Nothing like that is human; it's just wearing a pretty shell."

The floor began to split apart along the lines of blood, and I realized I could see something in the darkness below. There was a tense moment of quiet before the thing rose up out of the ground. It was a massive, scaled creature with spines. The top of its head brushed the diner's ceiling, and it reminded me considerably of a snake.

When it launched itself directly at Eric and I, he readjusted, and in a split second, his darker eye dilated from a slit to a circle, like a cat focusing on a bird. He slammed his hand directly down onto the ground, and blue sparks ignited in the air. As a result, the creature smashed into a shimmering silver wall that didn't seem to be there until the moment it was impacted.

It looked just as confused as I did that it had hit something, and the barrier then began to crumble into sparkling silver dust, dissolving in the air like snow on a warm day.

“That was a one-time deal, wasn’t it?” I asked, and Eric nodded.

“Yes. Now go; if I have to protect you, you’re in the way.”

I couldn’t argue with his logic. I scrambled to get out of the diner as he squared up with the thing more than triple his size. I couldn’t imagine how he could fight that, but I could also see a singular determination in his eyes. He probably didn’t know how to give up on anything, and I realized that there was something I could do to help, just like in Oklahoma.

I still had my gun on me from work, and I’m not a bad aim. As Eric fought with the creature, the diner was being destroyed, broken crockery was scattered over the floor, and I trained my eye on the girl. She didn’t look any different from any other teenage girl I had ever seen, but it was her blood that connected these creatures to this world.

Truthfully, I don’t remember pulling the trigger. But I vaguely recall hearing the shot and seeing the surprise on Eric’s face as the serpent hissed, thrashing back and forth. It seemed to burn up with protest in the same way the Witch's spirit did as it left Mr. Dempsey. I don’t know what happened after that. I heard sirens and the Sheriff’s voice arguing with Eric’s before I faded into unconsciousness.

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When I came back around, I was in a hospital bed *again*. However, this time, Eric was in the room along with my sister, who was pacing anxiously.

“He’s waking. Stop worrying,” Eric was telling my sister. He sat neatly with his arm bandaged, eye covered, and cane by his side. Meanwhile, my sister looked like a mess, her hair haphazardly done and wearing the same clothes from the day before.

“How do you know? He *SHOT* someone, Eric,” she stated, panicking.

“I’m well aware,” he responded calmly. I’m sure that bothered her even more.

“Stop, worrying so much...” I murmured to Claire, and she immediately launched herself at me. I didn’t feel a thing; pain meds, I suppose.

“You’re alive!” she said dramatically.

“He was never going to die,” Eric responded flatly, “Though you will be mending a broken arm for a considerable time.”

“What else has happened?” I groaned, and he hesitated.

“...You’ve been placed on leave. Pending investigation,” he said gently.

Great.

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Chapter 15
Interview with a Monster

Stacy White, interview with Molly: August, 1998.
Recount: 1930 - 1932.

My heels clicked dully on the linoleum floors, and the steel bars rattled back into place behind me. I walked down the long hallway alone, carrying only a folder, pen, and cassette recorder. I was a young journalist and very eager to prove myself. Earlier in the day, my boss offered me the opportunity to interview an inmate at the local prison, and I jumped at the chance. Serial killer interviews were in vogue, but unfortunately, I was assigned to an alleged child abductor instead. My editor hoped that the fact it was a woman would spark enough interest in our readers. Still, I was just excited to be there. It was the first real break I'd caught, and I'm sure I was only chosen because Rebecca was already covering another story.

A guard greeted me at the end of the hall. He was to remain stationed outside the interview room, but if I needed anything, I only had to press the panic button under the table, and he would be right there. I took a deep breath in, checked that my hair was all neatly back, and smoothed out my skirt before opening the door to enter.

"Good morning Ms. Doe. My name is-" I started as I walked into the room, but stopped abruptly when I saw the woman I was to interview. She was sitting up straight with hands neatly clasped in front of her. Her long hair was a golden honey brown, and her dark eyes held a luminescent quality under thick lashes. She was youthful with high cheekbones and blush pink lips. Even wearing the plain gray uniform of an inmate, she was still the most beautiful person I had ever seen, and it caught me by surprise.

"-M-my name is Stacy White, and I'm here for your interview," I started again, trying to regain some professionalism.

"Hello, Stacy White," she replied politely. Her voice was soft, and her teeth were pearly white.

I was somewhat disappointed. In the initial report, it was stated that Ms. Doe was extremely mentally unstable. She had been uncooperative with investigators, and the courts had to assign her the last name 'Doe' as she insisted that she didn't have one, only a first name, 'Molly.' My excitement dwindled; I had been expecting a certain level of deranged behavior. But she was perfectly collected, "Would it be alright if I ask you some questions? It's okay if you're nervous." I said sympathetically, trying to offer her some comfort and build rapport.

"I'm not nervous," Molly stated calmly in response. She gave no human emotion to connect with, no spark of social recognition between us. It was uncomfortable, to say the least.

"Right... Well, I'll just set it up, and then we can get started, alright?" I assured as I oriented my notepad and organized the audio recorder. When I was ready, I pressed down the REC button, and the tape inside whirred to life. Silence passed between us as I debated the best way to begin the interview. Would it be too brazen of me to ask outright if she was guilty? Or should I assume she was without asking?

I cleared my throat then began, "So Ms. Doe-"

"Molly," she corrected me.

“My apologies, Molly. You’ve been accused of abducting children. Can you answer whether or not these allegations are true? Is your incarceration unjust? Did you do it?” I tried, deciding on an upfront line of questions.

“I did,” the woman answered without batting an eye.

My heart began to race; perhaps this interview wouldn’t be dull after all, “Can you tell me why? What drives a person to abduct children?” I enquired further.

“It’s what I was ordered to do.”

“I see, so you were acting under instruction. Who did the orders come from?” I asked, trying to conceal my excitement.

This time Molly paused, but for whatever she may have been thinking, no expression crossed her face, “I cannot say.” She answered finally, and my heart sank.

“Why can’t you say? Can you tell me why you’re unable to answer that question?” I probed.

“I’m unable to answer because it would be a breach of contract. I cannot speak his name in association with this predicament.”

Her answer perplexed me, “Can you elaborate on that?”

“No.”

I sat back in my seat, exasperated. I wasn’t exactly sure what else I could ask that she would agree to answer, then it hit me, “Can you tell me *why* he ordered that you take children?”

Again she hesitated a moment, then nodded. “I can,” she agreed, “I had to be the one to take the livestock because of a man named Eric Linnaeus. You see, it’s not ordinarily my job. I’m not very good at convincing children to go with me. I unsettle them.”

Personally, I *couldn’t imagine* why her utter lack of emotion or tonal inflection would scare children. She was like talking to a doll; only I speculate that a living doll would have more zest. “Who is ‘Eric Linnaeus’? Did he give the orders?” I prompted her further, hoping my questions wouldn’t be too much.

“He was… A *mistake*,” She chose her words carefully as she began in earnest:

“When Nathaniel first brought him home, he was not more than an orphaned cripple. He was quiet, for the most part, and walked with a leg brace. They had never before kept a male child freely in the castle. Males serve no purpose once they are grown, so it was an oddity.

Ávila was tasked with raising him, and if he was not with her, he was with Nathaniel, who kept him close most of the time, training him privately so that he might catch up. We believed it to be a fool's errand. The others had been raised from infancy. Of the hundreds of girls chosen, only nine remained, and only four were expected to pass the final training. Of my group, I was one of only two to survive. We didn’t believe the Orphan stood a chance. The others were already two years older than he was, and none of them were hindered by any physical afflictions.

Still, Nathaniel insisted, and Master was hardly in any position to deny his brother's request. In truth, they were twins. My master was older, and he would inherit the castle in its business in entirety from their father. However, it was Nathaniel who was the stronger of the two. A public quarrel may have jeopardized the inheritance. As such, Master chose instead to make me a new contract. I was to spy on his brother and on the Orphan in particular. In return, I would be granted youth and beauty for the remaining span of my life."

As she spoke I was beginning to understand why she had been declared mentally ill. But it was hard to shake the idea that her beautiful, youthful appearance had somehow been granted to her, "When you say 'contracted,' what does that mean exactly?"

In response, the woman showed me her forearms, and I sat forward to get a better look. On her wrists was a series of elaborate shapes tattooed down the length of her arms. Two silver semi-circles, two complete circles, and a single blackened semi-circle, "What are they?"

"They are my contracts. A dark crescent for a gift given, ongoing. Completed circles for contracts fulfilled and silver crescents for contracts ongoing.

"What were the other contracts for?" I questioned before cursing myself for being so forward.

She readjusted to cover the marks, "I can only tell you of three. I have already disclosed one, and I am unable to speak of the last two. However, the first I made when I was four: *'I will always be allowed sweets whenever I so choose, and in return, the only orders I will obey are those that come from my Master.'* Next, I was gifted the ability to remain hidden. If I so choose, no one will know of my presence, under the condition that I will never be able to use my ability against Master. Contracts burn hotter, while Gifts hurt more," she explained.

"You made a contract when you were four? That doesn't sound like it was fair."

"No deals with monsters are fair," she mused. "However, I do not regret any of them. I have power that you, nor any other, will ever have."

That was the first instance I felt uncomfortable in her presence. She had spoken almost as if it were a threat; then she continued as if nothing was any different.

"Once the contract was in place, I began my work. The first true sign that the Orphan would cause trouble came only a year later when Lucinde, the twins' older sister, came to visit with her children.

The children of monsters grow very slowly. I had not noticed Radomir, her eldest son, age at all in the time since I had first met him years prior. For the sake of simplicity, I would say he was the same equivalent age as Eric at the time.

While the siblings discussed business matters, Eric and I were expected to wait patiently by our master's sides. However, Lucinde's children were

allowed to do as they wished, and Radomir wished to play with Eric.

“Come, fight with me,” Radomir whispered to the boy beside Nathaniel.

“I don’t think I would be allowed…” Eric replied in a hushed tone.

“You’re a human. You have to do as I say, and I say you’re allowed,” he countered, which gave Eric pause. In terms of hierarchy, the child was correct. We are expected to obey all requests and are compelled to follow commands when they are given. However, Eric was property of Radomir’s uncle, and that meant, by virtue, that his orders were intended to come from him only.

"Is your son very well trained, Sister?” Nathaniel spoke, suddenly interjecting the discussion and catching both children by surprise. It was then that they both realized he had been listening to their conversation. Eric turned a shade of red while Radomir looked guilty as all eyes turned to them.

Master looked profoundly displeased but did not comment as his siblings spoke. “You are surely joking, Brother. I won’t have my son fight your pet,” she scoffed.

“Pity. Has he fallen behind in his training so much that you fear he can’t outcompete a human?” he asked casually, though it was clear his insult had found its mark.

“I’ll warn you then, don’t blame me when your pet is injured.” She stated flatly, before granting her permission, “You may play with the human.”

All three adults watched with curiosity as the children each took up a sword and began to spar cordially, “Your pet has an injured leg? There is no contest here,” Lucinde commented.

“Our brother has spent considerable amounts of time training the human since he arrived.” Master informed her.

“I have trained him partly; there is plenty more still to teach. But he is singularly determined to excel, and I would be interested to know if he is ready to join the others in formal classes,” Nathaniel mused. However, it quickly became apparent what he meant was that he had trained Eric extensively. Even with his disadvantage, the boy was quick on his feet and moved using his leg brace to his advantage as if it were an extra limb.

The first round ended when Radomir was knocked to the ground, and the second round was headed toward the same outcome when he lost his temper, “Why don’t you ***stab yourself with that sword*** .” He spoke the words as a command, and Eric faltered.

Nathaniel sat forward in his chair as if he were about to intervene when the human boy spoke up. “No,” he responded calmly.

This drew everyone’s attention. Master looked to me as if to ask if I knew how he was able to resist the command. Lucinde wavered as if she were trying to understand what had just happened, while Nathaniel looked unmistakably… *Intrigued*.

“What do you mean *no*? That was a command. ***I told you to stab yourself*** !” Radomir repeated, lacing more magic into it to compel him.

Eric seemed to struggle this time, his hand involuntarily turning the blade toward himself. He trembled slightly as he held it there. It seemed he was unable to resist the order entirely. However, he also made no further move to complete the command. “And I said, **no**,” he reiterated firmly.

Radomir looked to his mother with an expression caught between confusion and fear. “How can he resist?” Lucinde demanded.

Nathaniel, however, appeared to be pleased, “Eric is very strong-willed. Your son doesn’t have enough magic to persuade him.”

“You've contracted him to resist orders,” Master accused.

“I have done no such thing,” he responded calmly.

At this, his sister narrowed her eyes. “Child. ***Come here*** ,” she demanded, and this time the boy moved, he came to stand before Lucinde with an expression of defiance.“ ***Give me your sword*** .”

Eric grit his teeth as he did her bidding.“ ***Hold out your hand*** ,” she continued, and he did so, though not without reluctance.

“Sister,” Nathaniel warned with a slight edge to his voice.

“I suppose you wouldn’t appreciate it if I cut off his hand?” she asked casually.

“Eric, ***come to me*** .” Nathaniel commanded him directly, and the boy gladly obliged, “That’s quite enough excitement for one day. It was pleasant to see you, Sister; however, we will be taking our leave. Make sure you return my sword when you’re done with it.”

As they left, Master motioned for me, and we fell into pace with them. “Brother, you’re playing a dangerous game. I saw that smug expression on your face. Lucinde isn’t pleased.”

“When have you ever known her to be pleased? Her son is inept.”

“You should destroy the Orphan,” he warned. For you see, resisting the persuasion of a glamour is no easy task. In rare cases, it can happen, if one possesses the will for it. Although, usually, if a child shows signs that they will be able to defy orders, they are eliminated immediately.

The youngest twin looked exasperated now, “Eric. Would you go on ahead? My brother and I have some matters to discuss. I will meet you for dinner.”

Eric looked unsure, “You promise..?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, child, now go,” Nathaniel said, clearly amused by his hesitance. With that, the boy nodded in agreement and followed the instruction willingly without compulsion. It was... strange to see.

“Molly, ***go as well. See that he makes it to his room safely .***” Master commanded of me. It was unnecessary. I as well would have obeyed without the compulsion. Regardless, as I left, I only heard a small amount of their conversation. It seemed Master was scolding Nathaniel for his approach to training Eric while his brother insisted the bond he was creating would be far stronger than any forced relationship.

***

At dinner that night, Master still seemed displeased, and when Nathaniel got up to speak with another member of staff, he took the opportunity to retaliate, “Orphan, ***come*** , I have something for you.”

“Don’t command me,” Eric protested as he moved involuntarily with the order. It was taboo for him to answer back in this manner, not that he ever let that fact clip his attitude.

“I will do what I like. You are property.” Master stated harshly, “I think you should have some meat on your plate, ***don’t you agree?*** ” he instructed, but it seemed more of a test. Even I could feel that there wasn’t much compulsion behind the direction given.

“...No, Nathaniel said it’s not good for me,” Eric responded coldly with some effort; there was rebellion in his eyes.

Master smiled, “You’re quite good at it, aren’t you? Defying orders if you’re prepared,” he pandered to the child as he pushed a slice of meat onto his plate.

“I’ve been practicing,” the boy said proudly.

“Oh? Should we test that then~?”

Eric considered the proposal, “Okay!” he accepted the challenge confidently.

“Wonderful! Then I order you ***to eat the meat I just gave you .***”

This time there was little to no visible resistance from the Orphan. He seemed to realize then that Master had tricked him. He wasn’t at all strong enough to outcompete the full will of an adult and soon was carving the meat into bite-sized pieces with marked reluctance. He struggled as he brought the first piece up to consume.

However, it was as it touched his lips that the second command came. “ ***Stop*** ,” Nathaniel said sharply, returning in time to intercept the order. “ ***You will not eat that .***”

Eric dropped the fork and recoiled from the plate as his master continued more calmly, “Brother, I would appreciate it if you didn’t try to feed him without my permission.”

“You don’t give him enough protein,” Master responded, bemused.

“Feed whatever you like to Molly, but do not interfere with Eric. Do you understand?”

“There will come a day when you cannot watch over him. I look forward to that day.”

Nathaniel ignored him then, for you see, the Small brothers had always been rivals first and brothers second. Threats between them weren’t uncommon…”

Molly trailed off as she contemplated.

“Is that what happens to the children you abducted? They become ‘pets’ to these… these *people*?” I took the opportunity to ask.

“Certainly not. As I said, pets are chosen as infants. It’s grown children that are taken to be butchered for food, more meat on their bones,” she explained, and my stomach dropped. There were only two possibilities, either I was indeed getting the serial killer interview I wanted for my career, or Molly was downright insane.

“Is that why Eric wasn’t allowed to eat the meat?” I was beginning to understand.

“Yes. Nathaniel felt it would negatively affect his pet’s morality if he were to consume it. So the nature of it was kept a secret from the child.”

“But your masters… They *DO* eat it?”

“Of course. The masters need to eat,” she replied casually as if stating a simple fact.

“They *need* to eat *children*?” I asked to clarify.

This gave her pause, “…No. They can eat any meat.” She said thoughtfully, “Every night, the banquet that lines the dining hall is piled with meat of all kinds, beef, pork, chicken, humayne. Cooked or uncooked, it matters not. Although they prefer the meat of tender beings as it signifies their status, only high-class families are granted access, and their family business is supply.

Flavoring is rarely used. They claim it spoils the taste, not that I could ever tell any difference. Unnaturally sweet fruit and ashy cheeses were the garnishes of choice. As a word to the wise, it is always best to avoid the fruits. Their taste is singular, comparable to no human food I have ever tried, and it is easy to overindulge in them-..”

I stood up then, “I’m sorry, I need a break,” I stated. Truthfully, I didn't want to hear anymore. I fled the interview room with my belongings loosely gathered in my arms, and the door slammed behind me. If I believed her, Molly was a monster abducting children to eat them as if they were livestock, allegedly acting under the orders of her ‘masters’, and if I didn’t, then I could understand why she was considered mentally unstable.

Either way, I hoped never to see her again.

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Chapter 16
Ocean Blue Eyes

Stacy White, interview with Molly: August, 1998.
Recount: 1933 - 1938.

When I next met with Molly, it was with extreme reluctance. Apparently, my article resonated well with the audiences, and they were morbidly curious for more. As such, my boss sent me back.

Molly sat just as arrow straight and emotionless as the last time. “Good Morning,” she greeted me pleasantly, almost as if we were friends.

“Yes,” I answered minimally as I set up my equipment.

“Did it negatively affect your morality last time? To speak with me?” she asked curiously.

“It… *surprised* me,” I answered diplomatically.

“I understand. What is it that you would like to know about this time?”

“I fail to see how a child made you have to kidnap other children,” I might have been too straightforward.

Molly took a deep breath in. It was as if it took some kind of effort for her to continue this time, then she began:

“The boy was permitted to join in the day classes with the girls after he beat Radomir. However, this brought with it new problems. Aside from the disciplinary issues, it quickly became apparent that Eric was not on the same level as the girls. You see, the children are required to pass a number of assessments in order to remain among the Fae. The examinations primarily test obedience, intelligence, willingness to serve, ability to serve, and loyalty. It is essential that each child pass, for only those with the correct temperament and aptitude are permitted to continue in the program. Those who fail default to the meat farms, where they will serve their use in a different way.

Out of ten, Eric was ranked seventh. His loyalty to Nathaniel, and overall intelligence, granted him a low passing grade. However, when the three girls below him failed entirely, he became the bottom of the class. He was largely unwilling to obey commands, and his overall suitability score was low. His only true talent, it seemed, was in spell writing as the girls physically outmatched him. Had it not been for Nathaniel’s protection, he would have been retired to the meat farm long ago.

The day of their twenty-second exam was shortly after the Orphan's 12th birthday, and I had been working with Nathaniel on another matter when he was called to the infirmary. We arrived to find Eric lying on his side, curled up on one of the sterile hospital beds in a medical robe. Beside him, Doctor Markos Bellerose was writing on a chart.

All fae have some varying hue of white hair. However, Markos is distinct from most in that he is taller, his chest and shoulders are broader, and his hair is slightly more pigmented. These are all signs of his human lineage, which he readily denies. He is physically only some years older than the brothers, although close to a century separates them. His eyes are lavender in color, and his light hair is a dusky white with diluted red undertones.

"*Lord* Nathaniel." Bellerose greeted him in a mildly mocking tone of voice and an exaggeratedly humble bow.

"Don't," Nathaniel muttered, immediately peeved as Markos smiled bemused. They had been close for many decades. "Why am I here? I thought you enjoyed sending me paperwork."

"Oh, I do. However, this needs immediate attention, and I presumed you would want to be the one to make the decision on this case?" he gestured to the human child.

"How badly is he hurt?" Nathaniel was tense as he asked the question. He stood just a little more rigid in the same way Master did when he was stressed, and his jaw was clenched. While Markos seemed endlessly entertained as he went on to explain cheerfully.

"It seems the boy failed the twenty-second test. He fell from near the top. When I was told, I had expected that he would need to be scraped off the ground. Nevertheless, it seems he survived, though his injuries are considerable. Internal bleeding, multiple broken ribs, a broken wrist, and a fractured leg. It would be my recommendation that he should be euthanized."

Hearing this, Nathaniel ignored him. Moving instead to crouch beside the bed. "Eric, look at me," he spoke with a nauseating softness, and the child rolled over to face him. He was pale with pain, and the injuries were plain to see as no bandages or otherwise had been placed. "Can you tell me what happened?"

“I fell…” Eric whispered ashamedly.

“Was it because of your leg?”

“...Yes. I’m sorry, I’ll do better…” It was strange to hear a child apologize, for it implied that forgiveness could be given.

“Are you in pain?”

The boy nodded.

“Good. Then next time, I expect you won’t fall,” he said calmly before returning his attention to Markos. “There’s no need for euthanasia. His spirit isn’t broken. Now, why haven’t you treated his injuries yet?”

“As you wish,” the doctor agreed, “With respect, I should inform you that I have been forbidden from using any further medicines on this boy specifically. Certain individuals feel it is a waste of resources. As such, he will receive no pain relief or other treatment, and I have doubts that he will last long without it.”

“Orders from my brother, is it?” He sighed, and Markos nodded in confirmation, “I see. No matter. Eric, will you sit up for me?”

It took an effort, but the child obliged, sitting up to swing his legs over the edge of the bed. That was the first time I had seen his left leg without bracing, and it was disturbing. Sickly thin with sunken muscles and more twisted than it should have been. It was an old injury, and I wondered exactly how he had sustained it. Furthermore, the leg was also heavily bruised, and I assumed it was the one that had broken when he fell.

“I’m going to give you a gift. Do you think you can withstand a little more pain for a moment?”

“I can tolerate it,” Eric responded stubbornly. I don’t believe he understood exactly how much gifts hurt when bestowed.

“Very well. Hold your gown out of the way. This will hurt.”

The boy hesitantly rolled it up to his hip on one side, exposing the full length of his damaged leg. Nathaniel examined the disfigurement carefully before activating his magic. Ordinarily, their energy is not something we can see. However, when it is particularly concentrated, it becomes visible. His eyes glowed bright blue, and sparks of energy crackled in the air around his hand as he placed it over the wasted muscle, moving it downward from hip to ankle.

The space of awed silence passed before the child screamed and began to writhe in agony. He was clearly not prepared. His skin boiled, blistering from within as the magic burned through his leg and blackened symbols seared themselves down the length of it where Nathaniel had touched. I had never before seen one of them use their magic in this way. The marks left were a combination of interconnected circles, crescents, and runes arranged in a neat line down his leg.

When they were complete, the discoloration around the break faded, and the muscle began to fill out. Even the bruising on his wrist disappeared, and I realized then that Nathaniel had healed him entirely.

“Your brother wouldn’t approve of that,” Markos warned. Although the mischievous gleam in his eye signified that he did. He had always preferred Nathaniel to Master.

“Perhaps not. But if he breaks my property he can’t expect that I won’t repair it,” he shrugged before turning his attention back to the child. “Why don’t you try standing?”

Gradually Eric recovered from the shock and sat up, his brow slick with sweat. He looked suspicious but optimistic as he followed the instruction without saying anything more. His first steps were tentative, as if he didn’t fully trust it, and he stumbled.

“Well?”

The Orphan was too astonished to respond initially, and when he did, it was with such intense appreciation that it made both monsters visibly uncomfortable as they looked between each other. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. There are limitations-” Nathaniel started, mildly embarrassed, but stopped mid-sentence when Eric suddenly hugged him.

“I don’t care. Thank you!” the boy repeated.

Markos appeared to be distinctly amused at this situation, while Nathaniel remained frozen, looking utterly shocked. He seemed to have no concept of how to return the gesture.

“Yes. Right. Well-.. ***Release me*** .” He used a command, and Eric obediently stepped back. “As I was saying, child, there are limitations. You may not use it all the time. The more you use it, the faster you will burn through the magic sustaining it. If it runs out, you will revert back to how you were until it recharges enough to continue.”

“How long does it take to recharge..?” Eric asked carefully. I suppose he didn’t want to sound ungrateful.

“Depends on how depleted you allow it to get. I would suggest exploring the limitations before retaking the twenty-second test. If you fail a second time, there won’t be a third.”

***

Bestowing that gift was perhaps the second biggest mistake Nathaniel ever made. The boy learned to use it only when required, and it seemed to me that for the majority of the time, he used it minimally. Only enough so that he could walk with the assistance of a cane rather than the leg brace, and under Nathaniel’s continued guidance, he was becoming regrettably formidable.

By the time he was a teenager he was outrightly dangerous. He excelled in his lessons, achieving top of the class in spell writing, and was soon ranked third among them for combat as well. The only two who opposed him were Calla and Loree. However, as he approached maturity, a new problem arose.

“It is time now, Brother. You *must* destroy him. I have allowed you to indulge whatever interest it is that has consumed you these past years, but that is to end. He is causing problems among the girls!” Master pleaded with his brother to see reason.

Nathaniel sighed, “He is not interested in the girls, and his benefits far outweigh the risks.”

“How do you know he holds no interest in the girls? Humans are extremely hormonal.”

“Because I just *know*, trust me. His interests lay elsewhere,” Nathaniel insisted, exasperated.

“And what of the effect he has on them?”

“What of it? I will not punish the boy for things he cannot control!”

“Your affection for him blinds you,” my master scoffed.

“And you are blinded by your ignorance. I hold no affection for him, he is property, little more than a stationary item to me, and he has never disobeyed any request I have made of him. I don’t even need to use

glamours or commands. He has brought us back hundreds of children; he understands how to talk to them. He makes them feel safe. Do you not remember just last week, he brought home an entire bus of them! Tabloids are publishing it as a mysterious disappearance. They have no leads. He left no traces at all! He is far better at it than any other has ever been. I told you it would work."

"I do not deny that your glorified letter opener has served his purpose. I'm saying he is getting too dangerous! He is no longer a child. What will you do when he asks where the children he brings home are? When he asks how they are doing, and why he never sees them?!"

"I will tell him the same thing I have *always* told him, that once he has 'rescued' them, they are taken to Sweden and re-homed."

"How long do you expect him to believe that? He's too clever, Nathaniel! You should see the way he watches me. It's like looking into the blue eyes of a devil."

Nathaniel laughed, "He watches you with conjecture because he can sense your loathing. If you would spend some time with him, you would see that his company is quite pleasant."

"I will never understand your fascination with him," Master shook his head.

"That's because you lack vision. You never look toward the future. When Mother and Father arrive, I intend to show them Eric and how well he has been trained. You should hope they don't change their minds on the succession," Nathaniel mused. He had never previously expressed an interest in the inheritance, so I was sure he was only teasing. Though Master didn't seem impressed.

"If you will not control him, I will," he warned, but Nathaniel dismissed him.

"Nonsense, Eric is perfectly under control."

That was one of the many arguments the brothers would have over the boy, yet each time Nathaniel remained unyielding.

***

I passed by Eric that day in the hallways. He was by now fully grown and taller than I. Furthermore, it was plain to see why his presence disrupted the other pets. He was young and handsome. His dark hair framed his face, and his eyes were a deep blue. It was rare that he should show any emotion, but he didn't seem unkind. You see, being fed Fae foods enhances features you already have. Eyes, lips, hair; your skin no longer scars when cut, and so on. Even so, I don't believe he needed it, the allure he held was almost unnatural.

"Molly, have you seen Nathaniel?" he asked. His voice was like velvet; it was disturbing.

"He is in a meeting with Master," I informed him, and it was only then that I noticed he had children with him. Two little girls no older than six or seven with black hair were hiding shyly behind his legs. They were thin and covered in dirt. They looked like they may have been living on the streets and when I looked at them they shrank back. As I said, I unsettle children.

"It's okay, she won't hurt you. This is Molly," he assured them softly.

"How much longer until we're there..?" the taller of the children asked.

"Not much longer, I have to take you to Nathaniel. Then we can get you something to eat, and he will help you, I promise."

It's not often that I feel as though I could laugh, but hearing Eric speak with such unawareness of the truth was entertaining. It pleased me to know that the masters *both* trusted me more than they did him. Even for all Nathaniel's fawning, he didn't trust Eric to accept him the way *I* accepted them."

Molly paused there was a cold smile on her lips.

"Your 'masters' are evil," I commented, sickened.

"Evil? Are lions 'evil' for eating buffalo? Are humans 'evil' for eating cattle? It's simply a part of life. All things must eat."

"Not all things eat babies," I stated bluntly, and she ignored me as she continued instead.

"Sometime after, my Master sent me to collect Eric from the day classes. When I arrived, the teenagers were in the middle of sparring, Eric was facing Calla, and she had disarmed him. She held the tip of her sword to the artery in his thigh without applying any pressure.

“You have lost,” she announced sedately, and the statement seemed to annoy him.

“Do you always have to aim for my leg?” he demanded.

“Of course. It’s your weakness; learn to defend it better,” she said simply, finally lowering her weapon.

Eric paused, and I thought he might try to catch her in a surprise attack. However, he instead asked, “...You’re better than I am... How would you defend better if you were me?”

This startled her, and her cheeks flushed, “I would just... Not make it so obvious? I’ve seen you use it sometimes. Why don’t you simply use it all the time?” She asked as she offered him her hand to help him up.

“I can’t,” he sighed, accepting her assistance and reaching for his cane as he stood. “I’ll wear it out too quickly for no good reason. It’s not worth using in training-,” he trailed off as he saw me approach.

“Eric, please come with me. Master wishes to have an audience with you.”

In response, he narrowed his eyes, “Why? Does Nathaniel know?”

“It was Nathaniel’s idea,” I lied without hesitation.

“Fine,” he agreed reluctantly.

***

We walked in silence, and he followed me through the hallways to Master’s office. He was waiting for us, and I stood to the side of the room while he gestured for Eric to sit. He didn’t.

“Hello, Orphan,” my Master began.

“What is it that you want, --------?” Eric spoke my master’s name without any reservations. It was a sign of disrespect.

“I see my brother has failed to teach you manners,” Master smiled tightly, “I requested you here in hopes that you might agree to a contract with me.”

The boy seemed caught off guard, “There’s nothing you could offer me that I want.”

“Oh? Come now; everyone has something that they want. I will grant you anything, name a price, and in return, I should like you to become my property. I would have you contracted so that you may only obey my command. My brother, nor anyone else, would have the power to command you.”

“Nathaniel doesn’t need to use commands on me, and I refuse to allow others to do so,” Eric was overconfident.

“ ***Sit*** ,” Master ordered him, and he sat back heavily in his seat as the order compelled him.“ ***Stand*** .”

“Stop it,” he snapped as he unwillingly followed the instructions.

“Why? I thought you said you could resist?” My master mused.

“You’re using more force than others do.”

“But of course, I know you are strong-willed. And others will figure that out as well. Do you want to be at the mercy of whatever anyone asks you to do?”

“...No,” he admitted honestly.

“Then make the contract.”

“With you? Also no,” Eric stated defiantly.

Master looked annoyed this time; it wasn’t often that people denied him what he wanted. “Let me put this another way. Make the contract with me, or I’ll return you to Nathaniel in pieces.”

“This conversation is over,” Eric announced, moving to leave. Master allowed him to reach the door before giving another command.

“ ***Stop*** ,” he said simply, and the boy froze in place, “That knife on your belt is nice. Did Nathaniel give it to you? ***Answer me*** .”

“Yes,” he responded bitterly through his teeth. It was a Fae-crafted knife made of layered steel with an intricate handle and elaborate markings down the length of the blade.

“Wonderful! Should I command you to take your own eye out with it?” Master asked casually.

Now Eric appeared nervous, “I would rather you did not.”

“I’m sure my brother would rather I didn’t as well,” he deliberated a moment, then shrugged. “But he’s not here, and I would love to know just

how strong you are when it *truly* matters. So, Eric. ***I order you to take your eye out. Just the eye.*** Don't need you damaging anything else."

Eric's expression flickered between shock and spite before settling on concentration as he fought to resist the command. It was foolish even to try. His entire body trembled with the effort, yet he still took the knife and directed the tip of the blade at his right eye. "Retract the command," he hissed, sweat beading on his brow as he used all his willpower to hold the knife back.

Master sat forward slightly, "Interesting," he mused; I'm sure he hadn't expected any resistance at all.

"Master, forgive me… Is this wise?" I asked quietly. It's not that I minded that he would injure himself. It was more that I understood Nathaniel would be less than pleased.

"Wise? No, but I think it's going to be worth it anyway." He smiled as Eric began to scream, the blade slowly driving its way into his eye against his will. Blood spilled down his face. The whole ordeal took longer than I expected; I suppose Eric fought it the entire time, and when it was done, my master sat back.

"I suppose not strong enough to resist then," he sounded amused, "That's good. Now, ***take your eye, and hand it to my brother. Go quickly*** . You don't want to keep him waiting."

Eric offered no opposition to the direction. However, without the instruction, I though he may not have been able to move as he seemed close to losing consciousness. I can only imagine the horrified expression on Nathaniel's face when Eric walked into his office, blood trailing down his face, knife in one hand and his eye in the other. I wondered if it would upset him to be handed one of the eyes he always claimed to admire so much.

"Molly, ***see that he makes it there*** . He seems unsteady." Master ordered me, and I moved to follow after the boy. It was apparent that when he told Eric to go quickly, he had. So by the time I caught up with him, he had already entered Nathaniel's office, and I struggled to find a way in without being seen. There's no point in my gift if I cannot get into the room to begin with. I managed to find a vantage point beside a window on the roof, and although the curtains were drawn, I could hear through the glass well enough.

“-is that all?” Nathaniel was speaking calmly.

There was a long pause. “Yes, that’s all,” Eric responded.

“And you do agree to the terms?”

“Yes. I will never take another contract with anyone besides yourself. I will obey any command you give me without fail, so long as I hear it, and I will never speak a lie to you. I will be unable to use the weapon you have granted me against you. I will live and age as you do. I will not naturally die before your lifespan is complete. I accept these conditions,” Eric replied in monotone.

“As a final condition, from the first time you choose to use it, you will never again be able to return it to a human state. You will have to live with it forever, do you understand?” It almost sounded as if he was trying to dissuade the boy.

“I do,” he answered calmly.

There was another moment of silence before Nathaniel answered, “Very well…”

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Chapter 17
The Processing Room

Stacy White, interview with Molly: August, 1998.
Recount: 1940.

After that day, Eric made a conscious effort to avoid me, and I found he was rather difficult to track when he was aware. He moved like a shadow, silently navigating the castle and disappearing without a trace around corners. It was frustrating.

A year passed, and winter set in. Snow piled on the ground and other servants cleared the pathways while I waited for Eric's return. He could not avoid me so easily when he had other humans with him. Eventually, the courtyard doors opened, and he entered through them. He wore a thick jacket and knitted scarf. His fringe was brought forward to conceal where his right eye had once been, and with spots of snow decorating his dark hair, he looked rather angelic.

That thought brought me some level of entertainment; he was an unwitting angel of death. With him, he brought a small family of humans, a woman, and her three children. They looked around in awe as Nathaniel, Markos, and Calla approached. Bellerose and his pet led the family away while Nathaniel remained with Eric.

"You did well," he praised, though it was difficult to determine if any true emotion lay behind the words.

"There are too many this year. I don't know that we'll have room for them all." Eric murmured, averting his gaze, and in response Nathaniel looked amused.

"Always so concerned aren't you?"

"I am not," he complained, immediately annoyed.

"Is that why you're covering your eye then? Because you're 'not concerned'?" he mused brushing the hair out of Eric's face.

"Bastard," he muttered as he pushed Nathaniel's hand away to allow the hair to fall back into place. "Don't do that, it scares people."

That was the first time I had seen it. In place of his eye was a new one crafted from magic. It was purple in color and had no whites to it. While the pupil was a cat-like slit, similar to the eyes of the Fae.

“Stop making such a fuss.”

“I’m not making a fuss!”

“Oh? Then what would you call it?” It was common for them to argue lightly in this manner. However, this was in no way acceptable. Nathaniel spoke with his pet as if it mattered what he thought, and allowed him to speak out of turn, or disrespectfully, without any punishment.

I didn't hear the rest of their conversation for my master approached. He stood by my side in the shadows and slowly patted down the length of my hair as he spoke, “My brother cares far too much for that orphan.”

“That appears to be the case.” I agreed obediently, briefly returning my attention to the pair of them to see that they were now headed inside.

“The longer this goes on, the more he will be hurt when Eric learns the truth and betrays him. The brat is self-righteous. He will never understand or accept us.”

I understood that my master was asking for my advice without directly stating a question, for it is frowned upon to do so. “If Nathaniel intends for Eric to graduate, perhaps he should be subjected to a *certain* test he circumvented,” I suggested casually.

Master pondered over what I had said for a moment, and then seemed to understand the meaning. “ ***When an opportunity arises, take the Orphan into the sub-levels. Show him what’s kept down there*** ,” he whispered the order in my ear, and I nodded.

From then, I spent my days paying even closer attention to the Orphan than I already did and hoping for the chance to fulfill the command I had been given. It’s... somewhat *uncomfortable*, to be under an order that lasts any extended length of time. It consumes your thoughts and makes it difficult to focus on anything else; it’s a permanent state of waiting.

Regrettably, Eric was rarely alone. If he wasn’t with Nathaniel or Àvila, he was with Calla, and if he wasn’t with her, he was out collecting children. However, I caught a break when he separated from his master one night after dinner. I fell into pace with him, and he scowled.

“Orphan, there’s something I need to show you,” I stated politely.

“Not interested,” he responded flatly.

“Your Master wants me to show you something.” I lied.

The boy snorted, “He’s not my ‘master’, and if he wanted to show me something, he wouldn’t send *you*.” He stated bluntly, moving to leave the area. He was irritating.

“Nathaniel is hiding something from you,” I told him finally.

This caused him to pause, “No he’s not.”

“He is,” I said honestly. “And I can show you what.”

Eric hesitated still; he seemed to be thinking through his options, “What is it?” he asked at last.

I shook my head, “I can’t explain. It must be *seen*.” I could see him weighing up curiosity against distrust.

“How long will it take?” he asked eventually.

“Not long. We can go right now. It won’t move.” The order was loosening, he was going to accept.

“Okay,” he agreed, and I began to lead him toward the sub-levels.

***

You know when you have reached them because the hallways become like a maze. It’s challenging to navigate, and it feels as if the room is spinning. You may quickly become lost if you don’t know which direction to take or if your resolve is weak. “Keep up,” I instructed as I noticed Eric was starting to slow.

“This is the sub-level. Nathaniel said I was not to come here.”

“He says that because he doesn’t want you to see. That’s what the definition of hiding something is.”

The Orphan looked displeased at my explanation but continued on until I stopped. We had reached the stairs. They led down to a heavy wooden door, gargoyles sat atop the banisters, and I made my way without hesitation while Eric followed more cautiously. “How much further?” he asked.

“Not far,” I reassured as I opened the doorway into the room beyond.

“It’s... Just the kitchens,” he said relieved.

“Yes.”

“So? What of them? They eat tons of meat. They have to prepare it somewhere.” He stated, annoyed.

“This isn’t what you’re here to see.” I mused, gesturing for him to follow.

I opened the next door and allowed him to step through into the processing room. It was a good time to visit. The production line was just commencing. If we had arrived later in the day, the meat would have already been largely processed and barely recognizable. However, in the beginning, there is no mistaking what it is, for the corpses are still quite whole.

The machinery hummed and clanked in rhythmic timing as the operation began. Bodies entered from the right, freshly slaughtered, and hung upside-down to allow the blood to drain out before they moved through the skinner. Once the skin was removed, workers removed the head, hands, and feet, as well as any other unsavory appendages. They were then sent on to be quartered; the choice cuts were separated and de-boned. The refuse is thrown into a crusher to be ground, and the whole area gets washed down before the next batch is sent in.

I wondered if Eric could identify the children from the family he had collected in the days prior or the little girls from the months before? Not all livestock is processed immediately, there is no meat on a starved body, and they must be made plump first, or sometimes the masters simply wish them to grow some before slaughter. Eric’s breathing became shallow, and he stepped back until he met the wall before sliding down it slowly. He seemed to be in a state of disbelief, he was quivering, and tears welled in his eyes. I would have been interested to know what he thought. Though, I supposed he understood.

“...All-.. All of them..?” he whispered, barely audible.

It took me a short time to understand the query, “Oh yes. All of them.” I confirmed, “Your master is very pleased with your numbers. They keep a leaderboard; your rank is the highest by far. You should be proud. You serve them so well.” I commended. It was curious; his expression then was...

pained? Remorseful? I can’t be certain. I’m not entirely familiar with that specific emotional range.

I was about to continue explaining the process to him when the group of three entered from the opposite door. They had come through from the slaughter room and were talking amongst themselves casually.

“-that will be enough to fill all the orders for the following months,” Markos commented.

“We should consider a second expansion.” Nathaniel was insisting as they conducted their routine inspection.

“Let’s not over-extend ourselves,” Master answered, to which his brother rolled his eyes.

“We can train more collectors, Brother.”

“In a few years, we could have no supply problems at all-. Oh…” Markos cut off mid-agreement as he was the first to notice us.

Arbitrarily the brothers followed his gaze, and their attention came to rest on Eric. “‘Oh’ indeed,” Master commented. He smiled pleasantly before turning to see his twin's reaction.

Nathaniel stood rigid with shock, no emotion crossed his face as he and Eric stared at each other. It was as if neither of them could quite comprehend what they were seeing. I can only imagine their thoughts. The lies Nathaniel had so carefully arranged were crashing down, the world Eric knew was shattering, and all the while, machinery continued to slice *meat* in the background. It was a pleasure to be a part of that moment.

“...You lied to me... This entire time..!” the boy was coming to a new realization. Anger replacing shock, and he was starting to stand, using the wall for support as he did.

“Eric-..” Nathaniel started but didn’t seem to know what to say.

“You killed them, every one of them!” Eric shouted in response.

“It’s just business. They’re just livestock, you must understand-..”

The Orphan cut him off, “They’re not livestock! They’re people! All of them- I brought them here so that you could **help** them! You told me you sent them to Sweden!”

“Come now, Eric! You didn’t truly believe that did you? Surely you had your suspicions? Yet you still collected them because I asked you to, don’t

hide behind morality. You ignored what you didn't want to see." His attempts to calm his pet were ineffective.

Eric grit his teeth, "I didn't think you were *butchering* and *eating* them!"

"I can put him down for you if you prefer," My master offered generously.

"You will do no such thing," Nathaniel snapped back quickly. "I can *fix* this."

Master gave a short laugh, "Will you never learn? He's already in the right place, just kill him and hang him with the others-.." He stopped. The air crackled with energy.

Beside me, something about Eric had changed. His right eye and the silver crescents on his neck lit up simultaneously. Glowing bright with fae magic as an energy ignited up the length of his arm, disintegrating his sleeve and enveloping the limb. He had activated the full terms of his contract.

His nails turned black and became claws while the magic blistered his skin as it encased his arm. When it was complete, the energy encompassed the space from fingertips to collarbone, and cast haphazard sparks at his shoulder. The newly activated spell wrote itself down the length of his forearm, and glowed electric blue with freshness, so that the symbols stood out starkly against the now darkened skin. I'm sure it must have hurt, but if it did, he showed no sign as the pure malice in his eyes left little room for pain.

"What kind of power did you give him?" Master demanded of his brother.

"I gave him a weapon," Nathaniel answered tranquilly.

"You gave him a weapon like that? Are you mad?!"

"Everything is fine; he must obey my command as per the contract."

"Any command I *hear*," Eric corrected him coldly.

The words hung heavy in the air as he took a knife from his belt in his left hand, and it was without a moment's hesitation that he stabbed it into his own ear canal. None of them moved to stop him as he repeated the process on the other side, permanently deafening himself. I suppose they were entirely too surprised. Or perhaps they simply didn't realize the

consequences of what he was doing until it was too late. Eric exhaled in pain as blood trickled down his neck on both sides, and he took the time to steady himself.

I could see the implication of what he had just done dawning among the others. Their expressions varied. Markos looked apprehensive, while Nathaniel appeared caught between disbelief and horror. My master seemed equally astonished and afraid. Loopholes in contracts are common, however, they are designed by default to benefit the masters. So for him to use it to his advantage was *unheard o*f.

"…He's your pet; you will deal with this." Master told Nathaniel as he took a step back, "Molly, ***observe***. I want to know all that happens." He ordered, and I nodded as Master departed with Markos.

Eric seemed to remember my presence for the first time at that moment, and as I was the closest thing, he lashed out at me first. I jumped away swiftly but made no effort to engage him; my orders were simply to monitor, and he didn't pursue me.

Instead, his attention returned to his master as the man drew the sword on his belt. Eric seemed to be calculating before he made his next attack, and he surprised us all by targeting the machinery instead of Nathaniel. Workers scrambled out of the way as he tore through the mechanics with his arm.

One of the machines sparked violently and combusted after the impact. This was especially troublesome as most magic is flammable, making fire difficult for them to combat, and Eric disappeared in the ensuing chaos. He slipped away, following along the conveyor track that brought the bodies in. The order I was given compelled me to follow, but I will admit it was rather unpleasant pushing past the bodies. I came out in the containment room and could see right away that Eric had broken the locks on the cages.

Livestock ran out the exit doors into the sub-level tunnels, castle servants scrambled to corral them back, and I hurried to catch up with the Orphan. I found him stumbling along in the hallway. It was clear his balance was off, but he seemed to have a purpose in his direction. His enhanced eye was dilated, scanning the area as if searching for something, and I soon realized what it was; Ahead my master walked with no hurry, entirely unaware of how the situation had escalated.

Eric moved quicker the moment he saw him, his footsteps were light in just the way we had been trained, and Master only noticed his approach at the last moment. Sharp claws met with a shield of energy, and the resulting discharge threw them both back. Unfortunately, Eric was quick to recover, and Master looked rather annoyed. “I warned my brother *so many* times to destroy you.” He muttered, drawing a weapon to face him. They fought in brief interactions.

The human was swift, and his magic was fresh, while my master was out of practice. The Fae don’t train in combat to the same extent that we do, as it is ordinarily our job to fight for them.

As such, my Master retreated when it became apparent the boy was unrelenting in his attacks. He used his magic to put distance between them and escaped briefly before Eric continued in pursuit after him. However, as I moved to follow an explosion from below rippled through the castle’s foundation. It caused some of the old stone to give in, and I was momentarily delayed by a collapsed ceiling. This meant that they were on the rooftops by the time I regained sight of them, and getting up there myself was no easy task.

Blood stained the pure snow, and Eric was distracted fighting with Master when an arrow flew. It struck the boy through the left leg, and he stumbled shocked. I turned to see where it had come from and saw Calla. She stood beside Markos in the courtyard, “ ***Another, through his thigh*** .” Markos instructed, and the girl obliged.

Master seemed mildly surprised, but not at all upset as he pushed his hair back from his face. He watched Eric carefully, looking down on him as the Orphan begrudgingly knelt under the weight of the arrows in his leg. “Finally in your place-”

“I’ll kill you,” Eric hissed, ripping one arrow out and then the other. The wounds closed over almost immediately as the gift down his leg repaired the damage.

“You couldn’t have shot his *other* leg?” he called down to Markos, who simply laughed at the dejected expression on my master’s face.

“It’s more interesting this way,” he replied cheerfully.

Master rolled his eyes as he refocused on Eric. I wondered if it irritated him to know that the fae were simply toying with him? Regardless, Markos

obliged. He instructed Calla to send another arrow which hit the un-gifted leg and limited his mobility as my Master moved to cut him down. However, to everyone's surprise, metal connected with metal and sparks sprayed off, sizzling in the snow.

"What are you doing?!" Master hissed as Nathaniel now stood between them, I didn't see where he had come from, but energy radiated off of him in waves that dissipated slowly into the air.

"He's not your property to destroy. I have told you that I can fix this; allow me the chance."

"How can you fix this? He is deafened! He will never hear your command to obey!"

"Please, Brother, I have asked you for nothing else but this, and you owe me as much…" Nathaniel implored him.

I'm not entirely sure what he meant by that. However, Master seemed annoyed, as if he had brought up something they weren't ordinarily to discuss. "You have asked me for a great many things in regard to *'this'*. Yet you expect me to oblige you once more?"

"I do."

I could sense my master's displeasure as he responded. "…Very well. But I will have you know I strongly disagree, and you may invoke no more favors from me."

"I understand," Nathaniel responded calmly as he turned his attention to Eric. The Orphan had taken the opportunity to remove the arrow from his leg again and now faced his master with a knife in his left hand. "Really, Eric, you must be exhausted by now. Give up." He said, irritated that he even dared to oppose him.

When they met in combat, it was clear that Eric was at a disadvantage, slowed by his injuries and unable to use his right arm against Nathaniel; he stood little chance. Their battle took them further from the courtyard across the rooftops and Eric nearly fell more than once as they got higher up. It ended when Nathaniel caught hold of him and slammed him back against the outer wall of one of the towers with enough force to crack the mortar.

He held Eric there preventing him from raising the knife again and placed a hand over one of his damaged ears. A glow emitted, and the boy

flinched away begrudgingly as Nathaniel restored his hearing. “ ***You may never compromise your hearing again*** .” He commanded immediately.

“You promised I would be free of commands; you promised *you* wouldn’t use them on me again!” he hissed.

“I lied.” Nathaniel answered calmly, “Now, ***drop the knife*** .”

Eric scowled as he reluctantly allowed the knife to fall away, and Nathaniel readjusted his grip to hold him by the throat as he continued, “Do you have any idea how much damage you have done? Our entire operation is compromised because of this stunt.”

“That was the intention,” he retorted spitefully as he tried feebly to loosen Nathaniel's grip. It was a pointless effort, they are far stronger than we are, and Nathaniel slammed him back into the wall again as punishment. It must have hurt, for he gave a soft sound of pain and glared back at him with disdain.

“That’s enough! ***Behave!*** ” he snapped, “Listen to me. You’re going to stop this nonsense. If you wish to pretend you didn’t see the slaughterhouse, that is perfectly fine. But you will not act out in this way. Am I making myself clear?”

Eric set his jaw and tilted his head up defiantly, refusing to answer. Though he at least had the good sense to stop struggling.

“ ***Speak!*** ” Nathaniel ordered in response to his resistance.

“Fuck you!” he said venomously in response, fulfilling the command, “Just kill me and get it over with.”

“Kill you?” the Fae laughed humorlessly as he leaned in close. “I don’t think you understand your position here. Your life is forfeit, I hold your contract, and I can make you obey anything I say. You belong to me. You should take a moment to think about what that means if you displease me again. I’ve been kind with you so far, but my patience wears thin. Perhaps my next order should be for you to assist in the slaughterhouse? Or maybe it should be that you consume human flesh? Tell me, which would you prefer?” he asked coldly.

There was finally fear in Eric’s eyes. Perhaps he truly understood the world of monsters now. “Nathaniel, please…” he whispered more meekly.

“You’re afraid? Good. There is some sense in you.” He muttered exasperated, “I don’t *want* to do this. But you’ve left me no choice! Destroying our equipment, releasing all the livestock, attacking my brother! What else am I supposed to do with you?!” he shouted, and his pet flinched, which only seemed to bother him further.

“You don’t have to do this… Just let me go…” Eric begged softly.

Nathaniel let out a slow frustrated sigh, “My brother was right; I should have destroyed you years ago for all the trouble it would have saved me.” He muttered ruefully, then commanded;“ ***You will say nothing more until I tell you otherwise. You will not attack my brother again, nor will you destroy any more of our castle. Follow me*** .”

Eric did as instructed, and Nathaniel led him back down to the courtyard where Master waited.

“ ***Step forward, kneel before my brother*** .” Nathaniel ordered, and Eric dropped to his knees reluctantly before my Master, “ ***Apologize for your behavior*** .”

“I, *apologize*, for my behavior,” he hissed resentfully.

“Good.” Nathaniel mused, though Master didn’t seem impressed.

“That was hardly sincere.”

“Sincerity doesn’t matter. The point is he is under my command. The problem is solved.”

Master considered before responding, “Barely. Our operations have been severely impacted. He should be punished for his actions.”

“...What would you have me do?”

“Command that he feel pain.” He suggested nonchalantly.

“You don’t have to,” Eric growled. I could tell he was still fighting the order to kneel.

“ ***Quiet*** .” His master ordered him, then responded to his brother, “That’s unreasonable; he is already injured.”

“If you cannot make the command, I can punish him for you in other ways.”

“No.” His brother answered in a controlled manner. Still, he delayed a moment longer before giving the command, “Eric… Do you remember the pain you felt when I bestowed gifts on you? ***You will feel that pain once more*** .”

The results were immediate, and Eric writhed in pain. I didn’t envy him. Rather I was relieved that my master had never seen fit to punish me in any way. Perhaps if Eric had learned to submit without defiance, he could have saved himself the agony. When it was over, he lay still in the snow, breathing heavily as the shock faded. “Are you satisfied, Brother?” Nathaniel asked without emotion.

“For now.”

“Good. Then we will be leaving.”

It was Nathaniel’s intention that Eric should continue to collect livestock for them under his command. Of course, the destruction of the processing room was still problematic...”

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Chapter 18
Leúchtend

Stacy White, interview with Molly: August, 1998.
Recount: 1940 - 1945.

For our final interview, I walked in and began setting up my equipment without any pleasantries. I knew Molly would talk, and there was no reason I should pretend to have any warm regards. I could feel her eyes tracking me as I moved, it sent a chill down my spine, but I didn't let it show. "We can continue where you left off," I told her bluntly.

"You've changed, *Stacy White*." She commented, it felt like she was using my name with ulterior motives, and she continued without further prompting.

"The first months that followed the 'incident' were the most difficult. A few of the livestock managed to escape entirely, and their appearance in the nearby towns caused some complications. It seemed as though every second-day human law enforcement arrived on our doorstep, demanding entry to search the premises, and with the castle half-ruined, that posed issues.

It was scheduled that Master and Nathaniel's parents would visit the Dunkel Estate to inspect the graduated pets. However, that was no longer possible, and so it was decided that when time allowed, we would travel to our sister castle to showcase them instead. Meanwhile, Nathaniel struggled to control Eric. For every command he gave, the Orphan resisted so that even simple tasks became difficult, and this did not go unnoticed by my master.

"You seem weary little brother," he mused as they worked together on paperwork one afternoon.

"I'm perfectly fine," Nathaniel muttered without looking up from his writing. It was plain to see that he was fatigued. His ash white hair was slightly less kept than normal and faint circles were evident under his eyes.

"Is your pet still giving you problems?" Master asked, amused.

"No. He is perfectly under control."

'"I see, and where is he at this moment?"

“He is fine. He’s training with Calla under Markos’s supervision.”

“Molly, ***go check that all is well*** ,” Master ordered, and I gave a polite bow before moving to do as I was asked.

“That’s not necessary, Brother. I will be there soon; I only have this to finish-..” Nathaniel protested as I left.

***

It had taken quite some time for him to calm Eric to the point where he was once again tolerable around others. But it was obvious that he still caused Nathaniel grief. Why he did not simply destroy his pet, or why my master did not do it for him, is beyond my comprehension, for the Orphan never did conform fully.

I arrived at the courtyard to see he was sparring with Calla. He was wearing tight pants with a fitted shirt, which was notable only because it was not fae clothing and it was curious that Nathaniel would have permitted such an outfit. Furthermore, he trained viciously. He no longer withheld the use of his leg and seemed to be trying in earnest to kill the girl. Their swords clashed together with some considerable force as they struggled.

Calla is only a small thing, no more than 5’2”, with ice-blonde hair and dull brown eyes. Markos was one who enjoyed dressing his pets like dolls, so that day she wore a modern classic dress, black headband, and a soft pink collar. Below her left eye she had a silver crescent which signified her new contract to Markos, although I’m not sure what the terms were.

Eventually, Eric missed a strike, and the girl took her chance to trip him, aiming her sword at his heart as she announced, “You lose, again. You shouldn’t use your left hand in combat. You’re not left-handed, and it makes you weaker. Surely your right hand can still hold a sword?”

“The point of training is to improve on weaknesses,” he growled in response.

“Are you still upset with me?”

“You shot me with *three* arrows. We’re not friends, Calla.”

“I was under orders, don’t take it so personally.” Her tone held no emotion.

“You didn’t even *try* to resist.”

“It was only your leg.”

“-------- was going to kill me!” he spoke my master’s name negligently.

“You attacked him. Disobedience should be met with elimination,” she responded calmly.

“*Porcelain Doll*,” Eric muttered the insult annoyed. She didn’t bother answering him, and so he said nothing more; perhaps he realized arguing with her was pointless.

“That’s quite enough for today. We still have work to do. Calla, ***say farewell*** ,” Markos spoke up.

“Farewell, Eric Linnaeus,” she followed the instruction docilely. “Markos and I leave tomorrow morning for the Leúchtend Estate. I expect I will see you there within a few days?”

“I don’t know. I won't talk to *him* if I can avoid it.” Truthfully his contempt was astounding, given the repercussions of it.

The twins’ father had summoned Markos to the Leúchtend castle on a separate matter. He was needed for his medical skills, though I’m not entirely sure what the situation was. I suspected their elder sister, Lucinde, may have been pregnant with her third child. However, as they left, Eric remained where he was. I assumed he had been given some orders which stated he may not move without supervision or permission, for he seemed irritated to have to wait.

“I know you’re there, Molly,” he informed me coldly.

“I’m making no effort to hide.”

“How can you serve them so willingly?” I wasn’t prepared for the question.

“Why do you fight them so much? Had they ever hurt you before you rebelled?” I countered.

“Because I want my freedom, and they’re monsters. They eat people. When they’re done with you and I, they will send us to the slaughterhouse to be butchered just as they do with every other human. Don’t you understand that?”

“All things must eat,” I responded unbothered. “You care too much for the nature of it. What does it matter what happens to people you never truly knew? Their prey is the young, the feeble, and the elderly. They do not

suffer, the process is quick, and rarely do they take healthy adults. As such, they would not choose to take you, or I, until we are too old to be of service, and by then, I will be glad to go. You're fortunate Nathaniel allowed you to live; he is far kinder to you than you deserve. Master proposed many times that you should be put down."

"You're a brainwashed puppet," he said spitefully.

"Now Eric, that's unkind language to use." Nathaniel spoke as he entered the area, then commanded, " ***You may move, come to me .***"

"I don't care if it's unkind. It's true," Eric stated as he turned to go to his master's side.

"How was your training? ***Answer .***"

"Fine," he replied minimally, then seemed to have an idea for he ceased walking and stood perfectly still in place.

It took an extra few steps before Nathaniel noticed he had stopped. "What are you doing?" he asked suspicious.

"You didn't say I had to follow you," he smiled savagely.

"Don't play games with me; we'll be late for dinner. ***Keep walking ,***" he ordered, annoyed as he understood.

Eric still looked moderately bemused as he obediently continued walking. Was he toying with his master? When we reached the turn that led toward the hall, he did not stop. Instead, he continued walking straight down the hallway.

A look of frustration crossed Nathaniel's face as he made a new order, " ***Stop walking. Come back this way and walk with us to the dining hall .***" He specified, then added quickly, " ***And then come into the hall, and sit in your place without any further rigmarole .***"

"You told me to keep walking. I was simply obeying your command," Eric said, clearly amused at his master's dismay.

" ***Stop*** . Must you *always* be so difficult?" he demanded, stepping in front of him and placing his fingertips on Eric's chest to stop his stride. "This isn't what I want, Eric. I have told you that many a time. If you behave, I can allow you more freedom. There's no need to be unreasonable."

In response, the Orphan knocked his hand away with the back of his wrist. "Don't touch me. I've told you before, this is already unreasonable.

You tortured me, you don’t listen, and you’ve taken away my free will.”

“I saved your life! My brother would have you punished in far worse ways if I did not.”

“Do you expect me to thank you?” Eric asked bitterly, “It wasn’t *him* that hurt me. It was *you!* You had a choice, and you made it. If you don’t like it, change something.”

At this, Nathaniel was obviously annoyed. “You’re impossible,” he said resentfully. I wondered how long this had been going on as he seemed rather fed up.

***

Final preparations were made in the following days, and we began our journey to the Leúchtend Estate. I had only been once before at my graduation, and it hadn’t changed from what I remembered. The castle is located high on the cliffs beside the ocean; it is surrounded by a small township and is fortified by an outer defensive wall. It’s far larger than the Dunkel Institute and made from shining white marble. On the few days when the sun shines, one can be forgiven for being blinded by its glistening surface.

Our transport arrived in a convoy, and before long, we were escorted into the meeting hall. Banners embroidered with sigils lined the walls, and guards stood in place beside each pillar. Although they serve little purpose now, other than to look formal and keep the peace.

The very air seemed to be electrified with an authoritative energy, and I was mildly nervous. Underfoot a red and golden rug with a Turkish design ran the length of the hall up to the steps before the throne. Toward the back of the room were wooden structures placed to the left and right. I understood these to be punishment racks. They were kept close at hand as the twins' father made use of them regularly for anyone who may have displeased him in any way.

The twins rarely spoke of their parents, and I can only remember one time when my Master did. It was late at night on the day after their parents had visited the Dunkel castle, and I was very young. In the beginning, pets are not granted their own rooms. Instead, we all sleep in a crèche of sorts… it is, *difficult* to explain. A temperature-controlled room where there is soft

bedding over the floor, it’s warm, and we fall asleep wherever we choose. However, most of us choose to sleep close to one another instinctively.

Master entered this room and navigated through to find me. He took hold of my arm and pulled me from where I lay among the others. It was the coldness of his touch and the motion of being carried that disturbed me. I was not yet entirely awake, so I was confused at first. His hair was unkempt, and his clothing was ruffled as if he had been in an altercation of some kind. He smelt like ethanol mixed with butterscotch, and he stumbled as he carried me.

I expected he would drop me more than once as he stopped to lean against the walls of the hallway before we finally made it to his room. He dumped me on the bed and crawled onto it with me, though he didn’t undress. Instead, he pulled me close and held me in an uncomfortably restrictive cuddle.

Because I was not yet well trained, I fought to break free of his grasp, and panic threatened to overcome me as his grip instinctively tightened when I struggled. I feared he might crush me. However, it was then that he seemed to remember his strength and slowly relaxed his hold. “Please stay…” he whispered gently. It was not a command, and that gave me pause. I realized then that he was crying. I had never seen one cry before, nor have I seen one cry since.”

Molly paused as if thinking, and I felt uneasy.

I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of what she was telling me. But a sense of guilt came over me for the times I had sought out my cats for comfort and held them against their will as she continued:

“He wept for a long time, and it seemed to give him comfort to pat my hair. I didn’t know what else to do, so I remained still, and when at last he calmed down, he spoke:

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to frighten you, I won’t hurt you…” I didn’t respond, for there was nothing I could say, and he continued. “Nathaniel is hurt… It’s my fault… He lied to Father for me and was punished. Mother did nothing to stop it. How can I run anyone’s lives when I cannot even protect my brother or stand up to my Father? He always finds a reason to hurt us… We will never be free of him,” he murmured softly, I wasn’t sure if he was speaking to himself or me.

He fell asleep holding me and was no longer there when I awoke in the morning. I found out later that during the visit, their father had beaten Nathaniel so badly that he had remained unconscious in the infirmary for two full days. I never found out the reason or what he had lied about, and I suspect Master never intended for me to remember that night, as he never mentioned it again.

I believe this is the reason that both Master and Nathaniel were so tense when approaching their father. They walked directly ahead of us and guarded their emotions carefully. They each wore a variation of Victorian-era formal attire, dark double-breasted button-down coats with golden trim cuffs and shoulder accents. Decorative chains looped from shoulder to shoulder across their chests, and brocade patterns tapered in at the waist. They carried their finest swords on their hips, and each wore a unique broach on their upper coat pocket.

Nathaniel had his hair combed, while Master had his braided neatly down the length of his back. Of course, we were also dressed similarly. Eric was entirely in black with minor golden accents matching that of Nathaniel's. The sleeve of his jacket hung empty on the right side, and his hand was hidden in a glove that reached to his elbow under the coat. His hair had been styled carefully over his eye, and like the rest of us, he showed no expression.

We were followed by the four other nobles of the Dunkel Institute and their pets. Calla was the most decorated. Her dress was a creamy light blue with hand-sewn flowers that complemented Markos's attire, and she wore long white gloves. I matched to my own Master, wearing a cream-golden gown with black trim. We all wore our own weapons at appropriate places, except for Eric, whom Master refused to allow a weapon on principle.

"Eric, you will be meeting my father, and you will be expected to kneel. ***Do so without a fuss. You will not attack or fight anyone here. You will do as you are told*****,**" Nathaniel spoke quietly with his pet giving him instructions. " ***Do not speak out of turn, do not aggravate my father, and do not tell him of what you did. Lie if you have to*****.** **Do you understand me?** ***Respond*** **.**"

"You're giving me instructions that leave me helpless," Eric answered, vexed. That did nothing to reassure anyone.

"I will protect you, but you must do as I say. I can't have you starting fights here."

Eric snorted. “When have you ever protected me?” he replied flatly, which seemed to irritate Nathaniel, though he said nothing more.

“He best be under control, Brother,” Master warned in a low tone.

“He is controlled, and you must not tell Father of what he did either. Don’t interfere in whatever is to come, I know what I will say, and I know the consequences. Do not give him up. Please,” Nathaniel implored him in a low tone.

“Again, you ask for more favors,” Master sighed, making no promises.

When at last we reached the throne, Master and Nathaniel knelt respectfully, and the rest of us followed suit. Their father, Lazarus Klein, sat before them and stood when they bowed down. His eyes were the same luminous green as his son’s, while his hair was an almost translucent white. He appeared to be more than double their age, and the ominous energy surrounding him crackled in the air. I imagine that is something he does on purpose to show his power, for it is an unnecessary effort to make it visible.

Beside him, their mother, Péronne Klein, reached out to hold onto her husband's arm. She wore an elaborate dress that trailed the ground. She was tall and slender with no curves. Her eyes were a soft lavender, and her hair pale strawberry-white. She bore little resemblance, if any, to her children.

She also appeared considerably younger than Lazarus; if I had to guess, I would suggest she was closer to her children’s ages than her husband's. But that was not unusual for their kind.

“Stand,” Lazarus instructed without care, and the twins stood as directed.

““Father. Mother.”” The twins spoke in synchronization to greet their parents.

“Enough with the pleasantries. Bring the graduates,” Lazarus demanded.

“Yes, Father.” Master agreed, gesturing with his hand that the new humans should come forward. The five girls stepped forward and knelt in order. Calla, Loree, Gemma, Tessa, and Emmie. Each was carefully controlled as Lazarus looked them over.

He stopped at Calla, and his eyes moved to Markos. “I can certainly tell whom this one belongs to,” he commented while taking her long hair in his hand and drawing the sword from his belt.

“Aesthetics are important,” Markos replied with a nervous smile.

“Her hair has too much length. Allow me to fix that.” Lazarus mused, slicing through it, leaving it cut short on only one side. The girl didn’t resist or move, showing no reaction to it at all, and although Markos seemed annoyed, he said nothing as the man moved on to the next. “There were five this year? More than expected.”

“Yes, we are getting better at choosing them,” Master answered casually.

“Which one of them was responsible for the numbers Nathaniel showed me? I should like to thank her for her service personally.”

At this, the brothers hesitated before Nathaniel spoke up, “Those numbers were not generated from a graduate. Eric, ***step forward and kneel*** ,” he commanded, and the boy moved as expected.

“A man?” Lazarus responded, surprised, “Do explain.”

“His name is Eric. He is the one who was able to collect so many livestock. His numbers are beyond anything we could have ever expected. However, he was not among the graduates.” Nathaniel elaborated, although looked somewhat anxious as Lazarus used the tip of his sword to tilt Eric’s chin up while he spoke.

“That’s very pleasing to hear. Regardless, why has this come to be?”

“He was an experimental project... He didn’t undergo the entirety of the training the girls did. Nevertheless, his performance was enhanced. He is what I had hoped to present to you under better circumstances.”

“He is pretty, at least. It’s a shame about the eye,” he commented, lifting the hair away from Eric’s hidden eye with the edge of the blade.

“Indeed.” Nathaniel agreed, glancing sideways at his brother pointedly, “However, there were some minor disciplinary issues.”

“Good, I see you used a firm hand with him then.” Lazarus seemed to approve, then ordered, “Remove them from the room. We have other matters to discuss now.” In response, the graduates were escorted out, Eric among them as he was expected to remain with Markos for the time he was separated from Nathaniel, and the other Nobles were permitted to leave.

“Will you be able to train more like him?” their father asked.

“I believe so. Yes,” he responded confidently.

“You should learn from your brother --------. He has surprised me with many accomplishments in the last decade. What have you achieved?” he asked, turning his attention to my Master. “I’ve heard a great many disturbing things. Care to elaborate? I left the Dunkel castle in your care. Why is it no longer operational?”

“My deepest apologies-” Master began to respond when his brother interrupted him.

“Forgive me, Father. It is not --------’s fault.” Nathaniel knelt again, “I began a new project; I underestimated the risks and ignored my brother’s warnings.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, “Is this true?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yes Father. I was the one who made the mistake.”

“And your brother was the one who failed to stop you.”

“No. He is the only reason the Institute still stands at all. The blame is mine alone.” Nathaniel corrected him.

“Very well-” he began, only to be interrupted.

“Father, if I may.” Master spoke up quickly, “Although the project resulted in destruction, it is a good opportunity to rebuild. The townspeople were becoming restless with all the disappearances. If we allow them to believe the castle is abandoned, it will alleviate the suspicions-..”

“Silence. Consider yourself fortunate that I don’t punish you for your blundering incompetence. What kind of household lead are you when you cannot even control your younger brother? Pathetic. The collapse of that castle is nothing to be taken lightly, your brother will learn to take more caution, and you will learn to hold your tongue.”

“Yes Father,” he said, kneeling beside Nathaniel to show remorse for speaking out of turn.

“Some days, I wonder if I had any sons at all. You’re more useless than daughters; at least Lucinde can spread her legs.” Lazarus scoffed, “Nonetheless, I am in a particularly good mood, so you will be spared the punishment for today. Now stand. Nathaniel, you are dismissed. -------- I have private matters to discuss with you, come.”

The brothers glanced at one another incredulously before Master followed after his father, and Nathaniel came to stand by my side.

“You would be wise to come with me,” he suggested, “My Brother would fret less knowing you are safe.”

“I should go with him.” I countered calmly.

“No, our father is not kind to humans. -------- wouldn’t like for you to be in harm's way.”

I knew he was correct; their father would take any excuse to be cruel.

“He will be fine,” Nathaniel spoke to me as if he read my thoughts when I didn’t answer him.

“How can you be certain?” I asked, trying not to sound worried.

“Because I know my brother, and I understand my father. He is in no danger.” He moved to leave without waiting for me, and I hurried to catch up to him.

He led me to Markos’s room, and when we arrived, I was surprised to see he was waiting with medical supplies.

“How did I know it would be you?” he mused, opening the door to allow us in. It was apparent that he had been expecting one of the brothers to return injured.

“You placed a bet on it, didn’t you?” Nathaniel asked flatly.

“Of course. Even when you were children, you protected your brother from any punishment you could. Baltzar will be disappointed he lost,” Markos said happily.

“Actually, I am unharmed. As is my brother, you both lose.”

“Are you certain?” Markos asked skeptically.

“Quite. Father was feeling benevolent today. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Ahh, and I was so sure. You two are nothing more than little boys pretending to be men, and you behave predictably. Though I suppose it can’t be helped that Lazarus is unpredictable.”

Nathaniel scowled at him, “Where is Eric?” he asked to change the subject.

“He is safe with Calla. They have been talking for some time now.” Markos mused, gesturing to the window where the pair could be seen resting in the private courtyard adjoining the room. Calla was sitting neatly

on the ground, while Eric was lying back with his head on her lap and an arm over his eyes against the sun.

“They seem at peace.”

“Yes, considering how he tries to kill her each time they spar.”

“I’m sure that’s not his intention.”

“Indeed, his intention is to kill you.”

Nathaniel smiled bitterly, “I’m sure it is.”

“Does that bother you?” Markos asked curiously.

“I don’t know…”

“Does it bother you that he hates you?”

Nathaniel thought about it, “...Perhaps,” he admitted calmly. “He fights me at every opportunity. He is malicious in his compliance and wilful with his disobedience. If I don’t word my commands with extremely precise intent, he finds a way to follow the instruction with the worst possible outcome. It’s exhausting having to think so much all the time, and he is exhausting himself resisting so hard. The only time we both have any peace is when he finally sleeps.”

Markos hesitated, uncertain, then asked, “How old is your pet now? I know he is younger than Calla, but by how much?”

“It’s only two years; he’s twenty-four in human years.”

“I see. Forgive me, what do you intend to do with him now? Surely you can see that your brother is correct. He has no purpose.”

“He has a purpose.” Nathaniel muttered, “It’s to make my life infinitely more difficult.”

“…You cannot breed him, he will not collect more livestock, and he will not submit to be subservient. He’s useless,” he continued taking a calculated risk in speaking his mind.

“Mind your tongue, Markos.”

“Do you care for him?” he asked, catching Nathaniel by surprise.

“Do you *not* care for Calla?” he retorted instead of answering.

Markos paused thoughtfully, “Of course, she is ma Petite Poupée. However, I understand her purpose. She will bear my heirs, when I am ready, and serve as their carer. When her usefulness has expired, she will be

sent to the slaughterhouse. Her meat will be old and of low value by then, but it will still hold worth. You seem to treat your pet more as one of us. Tell me, do you ever intend to send Eric to be meat?"

"Did my brother put you up to this? You have no right to ask these kinds of questions." Nathaniel stated firmly.

"…We are concerned for you. The risks you're taking, and your actions… Your brother says you no longer choose to eat humayne…"

"Enough," he stated finally, "We will speak of this no more."

"As you wish," Markos agreed graciously as Calla and Eric returned from outside.

The girl moved to her owner immediately, sweetly kissing his cheek before asking, "You called for me?"

"Yes, ***would you prepare for dinner?***" he instructed her, and she moved without any argument.

Eric, however, made no attempt to approach Nathaniel. He glanced at the medical supplies Markos had prepared and asked blandly, "You're injured?"

"No," Nathaniel responded.

"That's a shame."

Nathaniel chose to ignore the remark, telling him instead, "You did well in the great hall today… Thank you for not misbehaving."

"I was under your order, *master?*" Eric responded cynically as he leaned on his cane to give a condescending bow which made Nathaniel visibly uncomfortable.

"Never do that again."

"Is that an order?"

"I'm considering making it one, yes."

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Chapter 19
On the Night of the Ball

Stacy White, interview with Molly: August, 1998.
Recount: 1945.

We remained at the Leúchtend castle for several months. In that time, Master and Nathaniel attended countless meetings with their father to discuss business matters, while we remained most commonly with Markos. It seemed he had many grievances about Calla's hair being cut short, and we were subjected to his constant complaining.

I understood that our masters were reluctant to leave us unattended, for one of them was always with us. I tried not to think about why that may be as I continued my role babysitting Eric, and as the weeks passed, I noticed that he gradually began to get along better with my master. That bothered me. I couldn't see why they should speak so often or train together. It was almost as if he had somehow charmed my master into liking him, it was disgusting to witness.

The news came just days before we intended to leave, that Lazarus had announced that a farewell ceremony would be hosted in honor of his sons. It would be a grand gala, and we were all expected to attend. Neither my master nor his brother were enthusiastic about the idea. It seemed that lavish parties often turned into week-long ordeals, and they didn't want to stay any longer than they already had. Additionally, at these gatherings, it was traditional for a feast to be held in which the main courses were served quite rare and fresh, sacrificed on the spot in most cases. Nathaniel protested about the theatrics of it, while Master complained that fear made the meat tough.

On the night of the ball, Markos spent his time carrying on about Calla's dress, and Nathaniel spoke with Eric, trying to coax him into behaving. Master came to stand beside me then, and he seemed nervous. "Molly… I resend my order. You are no longer to follow Eric. Something will happen tonight. ***You are not to act. Use your gift, allow it to happen, and come find me .*** If you do

not, your life will be in danger… Do you understand?" he kept his voice low as he spoke.

"Of course, Master. If that is your request, I will obey." I assured him without hesitation, though I didn't know what he meant, then it was time for us to leave.

***

On our way, a messenger stopped us. He requested that Nathaniel and Markos go with him, as they had been summoned. The younger twin looked to his brother, nonverbally asking a question.

"I will watch over them," Master answered, and the pair reluctantly moved to do as they were bid.

They had not been gone long before Master whispered in my ear. "Remember what I said," he instructed before leaving us alone in the hall.

Despite appearing to pay no mind to Master, Eric was quick to notice when he left, "Where is he going?" he demanded.

"Wherever he chooses. It is not our concern," I responded calmly.

"They haven't left us alone for months, and now we are suddenly unsupervised. Something isn't right," he insisted.

"That is not our concern. We know our destination. We don't need guidance."

Of course, I knew he was correct, and it was soon after that we were approached by armed guards. They stepped into our path, blocking the way.

"Forgive us. We are in your path," Calla apologized softly, giving a polite curtsy as she had been trained to do while Eric seemed annoyed.

"You are to come with us," one of the men spoke. I knew then that it was time to activate my gift as I stepped back quietly.

"According to who?" Eric asked spitefully, earning himself a swift backhand for his insolence. I'm sure he saw it coming with that eye of his. Nevertheless, the orders he had been given prevented him from avoiding it. The hit fell on him hard, splitting his lip and very nearly knocking him over with the force.

"Meat doesn't ask questions," the guard responded.

Eric sneered, spitting blood at the guard's shoes, "Calla. You should go. You aren't under any orders-" he began, but the order came too swiftly for her to move.

"***You will come with us now.***" It was the second guard who gave the command.

"As you wish," Calla responded dully. She was under no protective contract as Eric and I were, although I wondered then which magic would win out in the boy. Would his contract to obey only Nathaniel allow him to disobey this order? Or would the command he had been given earlier to do as he was told hold sway over him?

In the end, I think it was a combination of both. I doubted the instruction worked as a command on him. However, I don't believe any kind of magic was needed. The guard only had to ask, and the orders Nathaniel had placed would take effect to compel him to obey. The resistance in his being was obvious, and I wondered how many times he cursed Nathaniel for such restrictive orders as they both compiled to follow after the guards. I waited until they turned a bend in the hall, then hurried to find Master.

Aristocrats filled the ballroom, and I entered the room smoothly with them, going entirely unnoticed. They were a variety of monsters, some breeds I was familiar with while others I could not tell from a human. All were dressed in eccentric clothing, and the few human pets present were no exception. Magic made the air shimmer; energetic music filled the atmosphere, and buffet tables lined the walls.

An audience was gathered around the entertainment at the other end of the room, though I couldn't see what was on stage past them. Ordinarily, it would have been difficult to find Master in such a crowd, but I was compelled to move toward his presence under the orders given.

As I reached him, I gently took hold of his free hand, and it was then that I realized he looked distraught. In his other hand, he held tight to an almost empty glass of alcohol, and he was purposefully facing away from the stage. "I have made a mistake Molly…" he whispered weakly. "Father promised if I did as he asked-.. And I was fool enough to believe him."

Master made little sense in what he was saying. However, as the sound of a whip cracking over flesh permeated the air over the music, he flinched before downing the contents of the glass in one hit. Confused, I turned then

to see where the sound had originated. Through the gaps between fae, I could just see the stage. On it, Lazarus was walking back and forth. Although I couldn't hear him well, he was speaking, and I believe the word 'betrayal' was mentioned.

He was wearing a thick glove on one hand, and in it, he held the Iron Whip. It was an item I had never before seen personally, but I had heard of it. The whip is a cat o' nine tail with a leather handle and iron fragments braided into the tassels. Iron burns their kind just as a flame burns us and is impervious to magic, so their father would wear a glove to prevent himself from being injured by it while he punished others.

To the side of the stage, I noticed Péronne; she looked anxious as her husband raised the whip again. Before him, stretched over a wooden punishment rack from the throne room, was Nathaniel, and it looked like he had been being tortured for some time. His coat was shredded and blood-soaked. His wrists were bruised from the restraints, and his expression was hostile. Lazarus leaned forward to whisper something in his son's ear, and Nathaniel's momentary shocked expression made me curious.

"Please stay hidden," Master murmured to me, recalling my attention.

"Forgive me, for I would suggest that you leave… there is no need to watch," I offered softly.

He didn't have the opportunity to answer me for the music cut out so that Lazarus could speak to the crowd. He left Nathaniel where he was, simply paying no more mind to his son as he spoke. "Now that this ugliness is taken care of, it is time for some joy! I invite you all to partake in the sacrifices," he announced, gesturing off-stage for the livestock to be brought forth.

The humans walked onto the stage under orders. Some waved or gestured fondly to the crowd below. Calla made a heart with her fingertips and blew a kiss, while Eric followed not far behind her. I wondered if he had given up resisting, for he seemed calm as they were all ordered to kneel. They began the killings from the left side of the line, and Eric was near the center.

The first sacrifice was made, and the body thrown into the roaring crowd. They tore it apart like savage animals caught in a frenzy. A fine mist of blood sprayed from limbs being torn, and heavier drops landed on my

cheek. I wondered if that would disrupt my gift? The following girl was thrown in still alive, tears streamed down her face, but the ordered smile she had never dropped.

At the Dunkel Institute, the slaughter was humane. Quick. This was violent in a way I hadn't witnessed before, and I felt fear without precisely understanding the cause. It was an unusual feeling. Others with pets were beginning to take their leave of the event while on stage, Nathaniel had noticed Eric. His expression then was somewhere between horror and devastation as each death came closer to his pet.

'Eric! *Please!* Can you hear me!?' he shouted above the commotion. His voice strained with panic in a way I had never heard from the calm twin before.

A long moment passed, and I was beginning to think he couldn't hear his master over the noise. However, he eventually looked up, and his expression was icy with hatred. "Yes," he hissed. I'm not entirely sure that I heard the word, so much as I read it on his lips, and I can't say whether or not Nathaniel heard it either or simply understood from the response.

" I release you of the commands restraining you. You may fight, kill as many as you wish !"

Eric's eyes widened in shock, and I watched as his gaze shifted from Nathaniel to the person beside him. He was only one away from being butchered, and as the guard reached for him, he reacted instantaneously. Energy ignited up the length of his right arm, burning away the glove that hid it, and his right eye dilated. It was one smooth motion as he sliced through the man and then moved on to the next.

He caught the first few entirely by surprise. They couldn't make sense of what was happening. Perhaps they didn't understand how he was able to break the glamour, or why he wouldn't comply with the new commands they yelled at him. In moments the atmosphere changed as understanding dawned on the creatures around. They were facing a human weapon that they had no control over.

"Master, Eric is-" I began to tell him what was happening when I realized he already knew. Around us, the audience was beginning to flee. Tumbling over one another to escape the stage and the demon that hunted them. The boy was relentless. He had gained a sword from one of his victims, and he now cut through anyone too slow to escape or too dumb to

face him with both the sword and his arm. He must have been holding back during training.

My Master moved immediately to go to his brother, and I followed close behind. We reached Nathaniel and released him. “Brother, please hurry,” Master urged him, trying to help him up as he collapsed heavily, but Nathaniel brushed him off.

“Don’t touch me. You betrayed me to Father!” he snarled as he slowly stood again on his own.

“I’m sorry I didn’t-” Master began, but Nathaniel stopped him.

“You expect me to believe that he fooled you again?! You’re weak, and you always will be. Go. Drink yourself to death for all I care.” I knew the words must have hurt, for Master flinched, and Nathaniel took his sword from him as he moved past.

“ ***Stand down, Eric*** ,” Nathaniel ordered as he proceeded toward his father, and the pet did as he was told, standing perfectly still.

“What did you do?” Lazarus sneered, surprised to see him approach.

“I made a weapon better than anything you’ll ever make. Surrender, and I might consider allowing you to live,” he responded coldly.

“You expect me to take orders from the likes of *you?*”

“No,” Nathaniel responded calmly, his own energy flaring up to radiate from him as he attacked his father. The battle between them was swift. It seemed Lazarus wasted more magic for show than he kept for practical use, and Nathaniel’s magic overwhelmed it. When he realized he would lose, Lazarus begrudgingly surrendered.

“You wouldn’t kill your father, would you?” he asked snidely. It was as if he already knew the answer.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t be telling me what I would, or would not do,” Nathaniel warned.

“What is it that you want then?”

“You will never send for me. You will never look for me. When I leave today, I no longer exist. Am I clear?”

“I would like nothing more than for you *not* to exist,” his father agreed hostilely.

“Good. ***Eric*** -” Nathaniel began but stopped as he was cut off.

“Release Calla from her commands, then I’ll do whatever you say. You don’t have to use orders,” Eric spoke quickly.

Nathaniel watched him cautiously, calculating, before speaking calmly, “Calla, ***you are released of all commands given .***”

The girl seemed relieved, taking a deep breath in, “Thank you…” she whispered. It looked like she might cry.

“Don’t thank me. Get up. We’re not safe. We have to leave,” Eric said firmly.

“I can’t-.. Markos…”

“Calla!” he snapped, frustrated, “He’s not something you should care for! None of them are! We need to go!”

“I’m contracted, Eric!” she shouted back in response, and he finally seemed to understand. “I cannot leave him. But we will meet one day again, I promise. Now go. They’re after you, not me.”

Eric still seemed conflicted before he finally agreed, “…Stay safe. We’ll meet again.”

He turned to go with Nathaniel, and they made their way quickly from the building, “ ***Follow them. I want to know …***” my master ordered softly. I didn’t entirely know what he wanted, but I understood I was to follow. Keeping up with them was a challenge. If I wasn’t compelled, I doubt I would have been able to find them again.

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As it were, I caught up with them a couple of hours later. They were deep in the forest some ways away from the castle, and they were fighting despite both being clearly exhausted. Eric was breathing heavily, and neither seemed to have any magic left to use.

“I don’t want to fight you, Eric!” Nathaniel exclaimed breathlessly, making no move to defend himself.

“That’s too bad because I want to *kill* you!” he responded venomously. It was nothing short of treachery that he should hold a sword to his master’s throat. However, that was precisely what he was doing. He had cornered

Nathaniel against a large tree and the tip of his blade was directed with murderous intent.

“And yet, you still haven’t done it..? Why is that?” the fae asked softly.

Eric didn’t have an answer for him but looked infinitely frustrated when Nathaniel gave up. Gradually he lowered his weapon, and they sat on the ground together. They stayed like that for a long time, not saying anything to one another as they rested.

“My family is going to come after you…”

“I don’t care. Let them.”

Nathaniel chuckled softly, coughing blood with the effort. “You’re fearless.”

“No… I fear being controlled,” Eric corrected quietly.

“…I’m sorry…”

“Are you even capable of being sorry?”

“Of course I am, don’t be such a brat,” he grumbled with a sigh, “Can I ask you something..?”

“I can’t see what difference anything you could ask will make now.”

“Do you think we could ever be friends?”

At this, he seemed irritated, "What kind of a question is that?”

“One I want an answer to.”

“You’re insufferable,” Eric muttered before slowly breathing out and telling him, “I don’t know…”

His master took that surprisingly well. It was ludicrous that he was even asking to be friends in the first place. “Can I ask you something else?”

“Since when did you decide to ask for *my* permission for anything?”

“Why do you hate yourself?” he asked more gently, and Eric hesitated.

“Such stupid questions,” he groaned. “I hate myself because I let you trick me, and because even knowing what I do now, I don’t care as much as I should. I tried so hard not to be, but I’m just like *them*.”

“Like who?”

He shook his head, “Doesn’t matter… I knew it sounded too good to be true, but I wanted to believe you. I don’t know if I can forgive either of us

for that.”

“If it causes you so much pain, why did you choose to believe me?”

“…Because I trusted you, and I love this world, your world. I like being a part of it. Before it, I was nothing. Weak. And it never mattered how hard I tried… I was trapped. I could never do the things everyone else could, and I want to be better than them,” he admitted quietly though it appeared to cause him distress. “I hate myself *more* for feeling like that.”

“It’s okay to want things… To want power, to want something that makes you special. It’s very human; you don't need to feel ashamed…” Nathaniel assured him softly.

“…All the things I want are terrible,” Eric whispered.

“That’s okay; you don’t have to be a good person.”

“But I want to be…”

They sat in silence for a long time after that, before Nathaniel spoke again, “Go be then…”

“What?”

“I have to let you go… You’re free to leave. I won’t stop you. Head south; there’s a town not far. You can make it.”

Eric turned to look at him, confused, “I’m free to leave? I can walk away, and you won’t command me back? You’re breaking the contract?”

“Calm down. I’m not *that* benevolent. Your contract will remain in place, so you have a thousand years to be better. But you are free to leave whenever you so choose…”

“Soon then… I can’t move yet,” he murmured.

“Take your time.”

“…Nathaniel, I-” Eric started, but his master held up a hand.

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Thank you,” he stated regardless, and his master looked uncomfortable.

“Never thank me again, either.”

“Is that another order?” Eric teased.

“I’m considering it,” he smiled weakly.

Eric left some hours later, stumbling off toward the south as instructed, and Nathaniel made no move to stop him.

As such, I wasn't expecting it when he spoke again, "I know you're there, Molly. So you have a choice to make; your life, or a contract."

Molly stopped there.

"…Did you make a contract with him?" I asked uncertainly.

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"One I found a loophole in," she smiled broadly now, and I felt nauseous.

"What do you mean?"

"Goodbye, Stacy White," she said simply; then she began to disappear before my eyes. I pressed the panic button immediately, but it was too late. By the time the warden came in, Molly was gone, and I was alone.

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Chapter 20
My Brother Works in a Town that Doesn’t Exist

Claire Walsh: November, 1998.

I suppose I should preface this by saying that I love my brother dearly. He’s the sweetest, kindest, *bravest* man I’ve ever known, and he’s always been there for me. But… he has a unique talent for ignoring things he doesn’t want to know. For example, the fact that I woke up next to a man whose name I can’t remember and am trying to gather my things as quietly as possible while pulling on my little white socks; is *definitely* something he would pretend he wasn’t aware of.

In a similar way, I don’t think he acknowledges that the town we grew up in, the very one he *still* lives in, doesn’t exist. It’s ‘that tourist town in Maine somewhere’ that everyone remembers visiting but can’t quite remember exactly *where* it was or *what* it was called. Vacation photos of landmark signs are always inexplicably blurry, or accidentally photo-bombed out. I visit for the holidays every year, and I usually stay from November to January.

So, how do you find a town that doesn’t exist? Well… You get lost. *Really* lost. Drive until your GPS stops working, and nothing looks familiar. When you realize you don’t know where you are, just keep driving. Don’t turn around or look back. Put no thought into it at all; it’s not hard to do, the town will draw you to it in a strange sort of way. You just have to let it.

The forest will feel endless, and when the roads turn to gravel, that means you’re close. Also, make sure you turn *left*. Continuing straight will lead you astray, and you’ll never find it then. While turning right means you will no longer exist. I only know that because it happened to friends of mine last year. I watched them turn the wrong way, but honestly, I can’t recall anything else about them. Not even their names. I only remember the ‘feeling’ of knowing them, and it gives me a bad headache every time I think about it. So, yeah. Just make sure to turn left, okay?

When you arrive, it will dawn on you all at once that you are now ‘somewhere’, and it will be difficult to remember how you got there. Don’t worry though. It’s a very typical town. According to the welcome sign, it has a population of 6,504, and everything you could ever need is located in the center of town. You should probably be warned, though, that the locals are especially friendly at this time of the year.

It started snowing early, and everyone is going overboard with their Christmas lights. I don’t say that in any negative way, it’s absolutely magical walking down the street under the glittering lights and hearing carollers singing in unison in the park. The town overall is warm and welcoming. Sometimes I wonder how many of the townspeople realize they aren’t on any maps?

Millie's Diner is the *best* café to dine at; it’s on the corner of the main street. But it’s currently undergoing repairs… which brings me back to my point: My brother, Charles, is an officer/park ranger. His job sort of covers both aspects, but I’ve never actually bothered to ask what his ‘official’ title is. He dropped out of art school two years ago and decided he wanted to be in law enforcement. Don't ask me why.

A few weeks ago, he was involved in an incident while off duty. He was at the diner after work with his friend, and something bad happened. He wouldn’t give me many details, but he was hurt, and I got the impression that someone died? As a result, he was placed on leave. Now Charles loves his job, so being suspended has had a detrimental impact on him, and he’s hardly left his apartment since.

Which is why I decided I would try and cheer him up a bit. I picked up some supplies from the store and headed home. However, when I got there, the front door was slightly ajar, and that gave me pause. It’s not like him to just leave the door open like that, but at the same time, it’s not exactly unusual for others to do that since the crime rate is virtually non-existent.

“Charles?” I called as I pushed my way into the apartment with groceries in my arms, “Are you awake-?” I stopped. The house was dim, and I realized he was not up yet. However, there was a figure standing in the hallway. It was the shadowy silhouette of a woman wearing a dress. She was just outside Charles’s room and withdrew her hand from the door handle as I approached. When she looked at me, her eyes shone in the darkness, and an initial chill ran down my spine.

It took a moment for my brain to catch up before I understood; she was sneaking out just in the same way I had been earlier. “Oh.. *OH!* Don’t worry. I didn’t see anything! I’m just… Going to go!” I called softly as I retreated from the apartment strategically. My brother is 6’1” and 195 lbs since he started working out. He’s got a strong jaw, light brown hair, and soft gray eyes, the same as mine. I had a giggle with myself, noting that he hadn’t shaved in days, and the stubble probably made him look quite rugged despite him actually being a teddy bear. It shouldn’t have surprised me at all to see a girl leaving his room.

I went on a little walk down the street with my shopping while I waited for her to leave. Mrs. Jones, my brother’s nosy neighbor, scowled at me and I smiled back, giving a little wave. She’d always been unfriendly, not sure why. When I reached the edge of the forest behind the apartments, I turned around and hoped I had given the girl enough time. If she was still there, I guessed I would just awkwardly invite her to join us for breakfast?

Thankfully when I returned, she was gone without leaving a single trace. I played some obnoxiously loud music and started cooking breakfast as I sang along. I had hoped that the noise would be enough to force Charles to get up, and it was. “Good morning! Did you have a good night?” I teased with a wink.

He blinked back at me slowly. His hair was messy, and his voice was still thick with sleep as he grumbled, “What are you doing? Turn the music down…”

I rolled my eyes but obliged the request as he moved off to the bathroom. When he returned, he looked a bit more alive, having showered and all, if not mildly perturbed. “What’s with that face?” I asked playfully.

“It’s so itchy,” he complained, referring to the cast on his arm as his brows knitted into a frustrated, exasperated expression.

I laughed then, “That didn’t stop you from getting some action, though, did it?” I taunted.

He sighed, shaking his head, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The girl! Charles!”

“What girl?”

“Fine, fine, forget it,” I let him off the hook. If he didn’t want to talk about it, I wasn’t going to force the issue. I could tell he wasn’t in a good

mood, but I tried to counterbalance it with optimism. Unfortunately, he poked around at his breakfast like a depressed schoolgirl and barely ate anything.

“We’re going out to do something fun today,” I announced.

“I don’t want to go out anywhere, Claire…” he responded bleakly.

“Well, that’s great because I wasn’t *asking* you. I was, in fact, *telling* you that that’s what we’re doing today.”

I could see him struggling with himself. I knew he wanted to be a good brother, but I was also very certain that he did not want to leave the house. “Where are we going?” he asked finally.

“Since you like the outdoors so much, I was thinking we could go on a hike!”

“You hate hiking,” he said skeptically, looking at me with a raised eyebrow.

“I do *not!*” I lied, “Plus, I bought a super cute outfit for it. So we have to go.”

He seemed to think it over for a long moment before he answered reluctantly, “..Okay but, you *know* it’s **cold** out there, right?”

“I know that, Charles,” I assured confidently. As it would turn out, what he meant by ‘*cold’* was actually, *‘extremely fucking freezing’*.

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When we set out on the short six-mile hike, I was full of enthusiasm and hope, but by the time we reached the two-mile marker, I was more than ready to give up. Charles walks like he’s at work, and on assignment to get somewhere within a certain time frame, so I struggled to keep up the entire time.

When we stopped to rest, I put my hands on my knees and hung my head in defeat. My breath steamed up the air directly around me, and I could hear Charles chuckling at my expense.

“We can turn around at this point if you’d like, Claire?” he offered; at least he was smiling.

“Oh, no no no. No. We’re almost there, right? I can do this!”

“It’s another four miles round trip,” he corrected me.

“*Four* miles?” I repeated incredulously as I wiped the frozen sweat off my brow, “And you patrol this route *every* day?”

“Not every day, every couple of days. It’s not a popular trail,” he assured, not that it made me feel any better.

“Right, onwards then,” I said, regretting every word as I started off again.

Honestly, it was kind of eye-opening to see him like this. I hadn’t realized how fit my brother had gotten, or how much he had changed since the last time I saw him last January. He seemed more stoic now; something must have happened. As we walked, he pointed out the natural features of the landscape. He tried to teach me how to identify the way the snowfall built up on specific slopes that could be dangerous, and which peaks belonged to which mountain.

Most of it went over my head. I didn’t understand anything; it all looked like frosty forest to me. But I was delighted to see a northern saw-whet owl, which was pretty much the only bird I could identify. Eventually, we discussed trivial things. I told him about the three guys I’d been dating, and he told me how his job had been going.

Apparently, some hikers were killed in the mountains in May, and his friend, Eric, had been called in to help out, which is how they met. I was glad that he had a new friend. My brother is super popular in the town. Walking down the street with him is a nightmare because every second person wants to stop him and chat. But he’s kind of shy, so the superficial friendships he has don’t run too deep. I blame our parents for that. However, he seems to have a real friend with Eric, even if they are a bit mismatched.

Eric is a reserved person, conceivably even a little scary, honestly, and also maybe slightly too edgy for Charles with his full-arm tattoo. Still, they seem to get along well, so, I guess, that doesn’t matter. The only problem is that Eric is in town infrequently. Charles informed me he doesn’t live there and that he just comes around to help out when he’s called, which makes sense since I had never met him before. Although I’m kind of curious to know how he keeps finding our town? Ordinarily, only locals can find it more than once.

Anyway, at the moment, Eric is still around. He's working with the Sheriff's office to get Charles reinstated, and he's hopefully going to join us for Christmas. I feel like I should also mention that he's kind of… pretty? But in an unsettling sort of way? His teeth are a little too perfect and sharp looking. And his right eye..- Charles said he lost it in an accident, and it's a prosthetic, but I don't know. It *seems* to see things. His left eye, though, is gorgeous, luminous blue with long dark lashes. I was almost jealous because of it the first time we met.

Overall, it's just nice to see that they're friends, and if Charles trusts him, that's enough for me.

"Hey, Claire… can I tell you something..?" Charles asked, interrupting my thoughts; he sounded anxious, and that, in turn, made me nervous.

"Yeah, of course, you can tell me anything," I responded honestly. I doubt my big brother could tell me anything I wouldn't accept. He means the world to me. When I was fifteen, our parents kicked me out of the house. Charles was only seventeen then, and he said if they forced me to leave, he would also. Which is exactly what he did. He dropped out of high school and worked full-time in a minimum-wage job to support us. I know it wasn't easy. It nearly ruined his life. But he never complained. He's never judged me for any of the things I've done, so I'm sure as hell not going to judge him for anything.

"..I think… I believe in the supernatural…" he said quietly.

This caught me completely by surprise, and I laughed. I swear I didn't mean to. I just thought he was going to confess to something like being gay, or doing drugs, or burying a body in the backyard, you know? Something more controversial? However, from the way he tensed up, I realized he was being serious.

"Sorry, sorry! I didn't mean to laugh. I just… Expected something *worse*?" I tried to reassure him. "What made you suddenly believe in that kind of thing?"

He seemed hesitant to tell me more now, and my insides turned with guilt. "...I've seen some things…" he said vaguely.

"Things like what exactly?" I prompted more softly to show my support.

"I sort of got cursed shortly before you showed up, and I shot the witch that did it at Millie's. That's why I'm unofficially suspended from work.

She was only a sixteen-year-old girl...” he trailed off, the guilt in his voice was unmistakable, and I didn’t know what to say.

“The town you live in doesn’t exist.” I blurted out.

“What?”

“I’m saying I believe you because this town doesn’t exist. It’s not on any maps, and I bet if you think about it right now, you won’t be able to remember what it’s called.”

Charles paused momentarily, thinking it over before enquiring, “If it doesn’t exist, how do you find it again to visit?”

“I just get lost… The town calls me to it?” I was trying not to sound *too* crazy, “How did you find it again when you came home from Oklahoma?”

“…I don’t remember? I just did..?” he looked almost relieved, and I wondered if knowing gave him some comfort.

The conversation lapsed into silence as we both contemplated our own experiences, and that’s when I noticed we were no longer alone. Standing on top of an embankment not far ahead was a woman wearing a black dress with fluffy trim at the bottom and on the sleeves. Her hair was long and ice-white, tied in a high ponytail. She was extremely out of place in the snow, and she held what appeared to be a medieval longbow in her hands.

As I watched, she slowly took up an arrow, spinning it in her fingers before nocking it up and drawing back the string. She closed one eye as she took aim, and my stomach dropped. “*CHARLES*!” I shouted, and he turned to see what I was talking about just in time for an arrow to fly past us at incredible velocity.

The arrow hit the ground beside us with enough force to send a spray of ice in all directions. I’m not an expert in archery, but that arrow looked unnecessarily massive. It was in no way a simple game-hunting arrow. It looked like it was designed to pierce armor, and I didn’t want to imagine the damage it would have done if it had hit. I couldn’t contemplate why anyone would be firing such a thing at us. I stood in shock for a long moment, too terrified to move, when Charles grabbed my wrist.

He pulled me along, and before I knew what was happening, we were running headlong back down the mountain. Another arrow hit a tree just ahead, knocking all the snow out of it with the impact as she pursued. Blind

panic consumed me; there was nowhere to go! Anywhere we ran would leave footprints, creating a trail straight to us.

I had no idea what direction we were going, and my lungs burned. If it weren't for my brother's grip on my arm, I wouldn't have been able to keep going. Truthfully I wasn't sure that we were even still on the trail at that point. The snowdrift was harder to move on, and I could hear a strange hollow echo under the snow. Cracks were shooting out across the snow ahead as we ran, and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. This was dangerous snow. Had my brother not realized?

"Charles…! The snow…! The *SNOW*!" I tried to warn breathlessly, but he didn't slow down or stop.

"Keep running!" was all he said in response.

I glanced back to see where the girl was and saw that she was disturbingly close. How she was able to move so quickly across the terrain was beyond me, but at least she couldn't run *and* shoot. There was a soft 'whump' kind of sound, and the ground beneath my feet started sliding out. I stumbled, and Charles heaved me along as the embankment supporting us began to give way completely.

Behind us, the woman seemed surprised as the cracks in the snow extended out and the powdery top layer slipped. She went down in a mass of hair and black fabric as the terrain fell away, taking her with it. I'm ashamed to say I felt relief as she disappeared. That must have been my brother's plan all along. He knew where the snow was weakest and strategically took us over it, knowing it would eventually collapse.

Nonetheless, we continued to run until we reached another trail, and then we stood gasping for breath. My legs felt like jello, and I had a significant bruise from where Charles held me, but I didn't care.

"How did you know we wouldn't get swept away too?" I asked, all but wheezing as I sucked in more air.

"I didn't. I just hoped," he admitted, which made me feel sick, and I'm sure his stressed expression mirrored my own. "We have to get back. I don't know what that was."

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Chapter 21
Some Woman is Trying to Kill Us!

Claire Walsh: November, 1998.

A frigid wind blew through the frozen trees, stirring the snowfall into icy swirls, and it was beginning to get dark. At first, we had made good progress towards making it back. However, I was ambushed by a loose stone under the snow and slipped, spraining my ankle. Charles took the shoe off and bandaged my foot, but he worried I would get frostbite.

We walked as far as I could with him supporting me until I couldn't continue. We weren't in any way prepared for the night out, and my cute new outfit wasn't holding up so great as the temperatures dropped. I could tell from the look on my brother's face that this wasn't a good situation. I wondered how many lost hikers he'd found the morning after dead of exposure, how many of them probably experienced a situation exactly like this. I was too afraid to ask.

"Hey, Claire, why are mountains so funny?" he asked suddenly.

I stared at him blankly. I was sure he didn't mean 'funny - *haha*', but maybe: 'funny - *we're going to die up here'*? I didn't answer as I tried to figure out exactly what he was trying to say, so he continued. "Because they're *hill-areas*..!" he completed the joke and waited for me to get it.

Admittedly, I was caught by surprise, and burst into nervous laughter. If he was cracking jokes he'd read off candy wrappers, things were worse than I thought. This was something he did when things got really bad: tell awful jokes to try to distract me from the immediate horrible circumstances. "We're *fucked* aren't we?" I asked through the giggles.

"..Ahh, probably," he admitted laughing with me, so that we were just a couple of idiots nervously cackling away on the mountain as we realized how doomed we were. If I could have kept going, we would have made it back before nightfall, but instead, we had to stop, and Charles was attempting to light a fire. I was about to suggest that he leave me and go for help when we heard the hum of a snowmobile approaching.

It had no lights on, so it was difficult to tell where it was approaching from until it was behind us. I heard it stop more than I saw it, and someone stepped off it with their boots crunching on the snow. Charles subtly reached for a stick and moved me behind him as the person approached. I could only make out their silhouette and a faint glint at eye height on one side. I thought for one horrified moment that it was the Snow Witch that attacked us, then he spoke.

“You’re not going to be able to fight off much with a broken arm and a stick, Charles.” The voice was velvety and familiar.

“You scared me to death. Why are you driving around without lights like a cartel member!?” Charles demanded, relieved.

“Glare on snow hurts my eyes,” Eric responded calmly as he walked close enough for us to see him through the dim light. “Why are you still out here in the dark? You were supposed to be back hours ago.”

“We were attacked…” my brother grumbled.

“Attacked by what?”

“A woman in the snow with a bow and arrow.”

This gave him pause, “I see. We’ll discuss that later, then,” he said cryptically.

“How did you find us?” I asked to break the uncomfortable silence that resulted from his statement.

“I just followed the laughing,” he answered flatly, and my cheeks flushed. I’m sure he thought we were halfwits. “You’re injured. Can you walk?”

“No… I-”

I was in the process of explaining when he took me by the wrist, directing my arm over his shoulder before scooping me up effortlessly. He supported most of my weight with his left hand under my back and his other arm under my legs, though he held his right hand away somewhat awkwardly as if he had wet nail polish on. It was both unexpected and mortifying as he carried me over to the snowmobile; I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I trust I don’t need to carry you as well, Charles?”

“Well, if the offer is there,” my brother answered playfully. He was teasing me, and I thought Eric smiled slightly in amusement at his comment.

When we were back home, I took a nice long shower assisted by a stool. My ankle looked horrible. Charles re-bandaged it pretty well, and Eric lent me his cane, so I figured it’d be fine. When I came out of the shower they were talking in the kitchen, and I hid around the corner to listen.

“Do you think it was a witch?” Charles was asking nervously.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see her. It’s not uncommon for witches to be a part of a coven, and you might have pissed them off killing one. But she wasn’t experienced. She summoned spirits without having a host ready, and the energy burned her up. It didn’t seem like she had any guidance,” Eric responded thoughtfully.

“I saw her father on the news…”

“So?”

“I feel horrible, I keep… Replaying the moments in my head-..”

“Stop it.” Eric cut him off, “You didn’t shoot a little girl. You shot a monster. There was nothing left of whoever she was before. Believe me, *true* witches look nothing like that, and they essentially don’t exist anymore. They went functionally extinct centuries ago, along with most other things. The witches of today are usually little more than pretenders. They access an energy they don’t understand, and their bodies can’t withstand it.”

“How do you know all this..?”

“Because I was taught.”

“…Are you a witch?”

This time there was a stunned silence before Eric responded, “I’m not a witch. The power I have is entirely different.”

“Will you ever trust me enough to tell me..?” Charles asked more softly, almost like he was speaking to himself.

“I’m not trying to hide from you… I just-”

I decided to make my presence known then. It felt wrong to eavesdrop on a conversation that seemed so personal. “I’m *SO* hungry! What’s for dinner? Oh, sorry! Am I interrupting?” I asked as I rounded the corner into

the room. Eric was in the kitchen leaning over the bench top toward Charles, who was sitting across from him, and when I entered, they both moved back slightly.

“Eric’s making some sort of tofu lasagne or something.”

“Butternut and spinach lasagne,” he corrected my brother.

“Well, it smells amazing!” I said cheerfully, entirely ignoring the mild tension in the room as I limped over. It was strange to see Eric so domestic; he was far too angelic for Charles’s basic kitchen, and I noticed he used his left hand almost exclusively when he cooked. More or less only using the right for support and still holding his long nails away from things. I wondered why he didn’t just cut them if they were in the way that much? Regardless, the lasagne was surprisingly nice. I’d never had anything like it before, and it had a good flavor, but it did need salt.

***

Eric stayed the night, he slept on the couch, and his presence made me feel strangely better. However, as it was nearing 1:30 a.m., I awoke. I don’t know what disturbed me, maybe something outside, since my room faced the forest behind the building? Anyway, I got up to get a glass of water and decided that a night walk would be a good idea. Now I can’t stress enough how safe a night walk usually is. I’ve been on hundreds. I get nightmares, and I’ve always found that walking in the cold air helps. So, I got myself ready and headed out with Eric’s cane supporting me. I knew I wouldn’t be able to get far; just another short trip around the block would do.

On the way out, I passed Eric. He was curled up and sleeping peacefully on the couch, but he wasn’t covered by any blankets, so I gently laid one over him. When I was up close, I could see that his arm had faint shapes or symbols down the length of it. From what little I know; it looked a bit like Norse writing? I was sure I hadn’t seen anything in the daylight, but those parts seemed to glow dimly in the dark. I wondered what kind of ink the tattoos used to be luminescent like that?

Once I was outside, the cold was bracing. Falling snowflakes glittered under the overhead lights all the way down the street, and it was perfectly peaceful. The only sound was that of my own footsteps shuffling along as I limped down the street before resting at the corner. It was nice just to exist.

I know this will sound dumb, but I worry about my brother a lot. His job is kind of dangerous. What if he gets shot at or something? Not that I think that will ever happen in a town like this. But still...

I'm not sure how long I spent outside; it didn't feel like that long. However, as I started to make my way back, I noticed a figure had stepped into my path. I recognized her immediately, long platinum hair and a gothic Lolita dress; she was pretty hard *not* to remember. Now that she was closer, I could tell her eyes were lustrous brown, and she reminded me of Eric in a weird way. Just something about her aura seemed akin to his. On her cheek, below her left eye, was a white crescent shape that shone slightly in the dim lighting, and under the other eye, was a darker complete circle with a secondary semi-circle alongside it.

She held her bow low and watched me carefully, as if she was calculating something, then she asked, very calmly; "Where is Eric Linnaeus?"

I didn't know what to say, but surely you're not supposed to tell dangerous strangers where your friends are? So I lied. "I don't know anyone by that name," I could hear the fear in my voice, so I'm sure she could as well.

"You're using his cane," She replied flatly.

My cheeks heated with nervous panic. Such a simple mistake to get called out on, and I had no response to give. She sighed softly and raised the bow, aiming an arrow directly at me.

"Tell me where he is. I won't ask again," she stated firmly.

"I-I…" I struggled to find words, and I could feel tears starting to sting my eyes. Getting shot with an arrow certainly seemed like an unconventional way to go, but obviously, I didn't want to die. While at the same time, I didn't want to just give up my brother's friend either. Thankfully as I was on the verge of breaking down, Eric appeared in the street.

There was some distance between the three of us, and he was still wearing the same clothes I had seen him in when he was asleep. Regardless, I've never been more relieved to see someone before. "Claire. Throw me my cane. Right now," he ordered, and I did precisely as I was told without

hesitation. I'll admit it wasn't a good throw; I've never been very athletic, but he still caught it with one hand.

He unclipped a latch on the side that I hadn't even noticed before and pulled a short silver sword from the hollow center of the cane. The woman turned to face him and let loose the arrow without a second's hesitation. I have no idea how he moved fast enough to avoid it. As Eric closed the distance between them, she fired a second arrow. He deflected it off his arm, and it splintered as it struck, leaving no mark on his skin.

When he got close enough to her that the ranged weapon was useless, she switched to a twin set of daggers and met him head-on in combat. It was hard to follow the fight; they were both moving so quickly that all I knew was the sound of metal on metal until they separated. Each retreated to an opposite side of the street to catch their breath as they circled each other cautiously.

"What are your orders?" Eric asked her. His tone of voice was annoyed, but strangely, not necessarily hostile.

"*'Find Eric Linnaeus, assess the threat, report back.'*" she spoke in a monotone worse than his. It was like a robot repeating back commands.

"Fine," he answered briefly as the woman attacked again.

This time when they met, the fight was more violent, as if the first round was just a test, and now they were fighting in earnest. It lasted longer and ended when she stabbed a knife into his left leg, knocking him to the ground as she did. I thought she was going to kill him then, and a new wave of panic washed over me as I realized I was about to witness a murder when she stopped.

She held the tip of the blade to his throat as she pinned him to the ground. "You lose," she stated placidly.

"The leg every time, Calla?" Eric hissed. He was losing blood rapidly; I could see it leaking onto the snow, though neither seemed concerned.

"You still don't defend it well," she answered and, to my surprise, allowed him up.

"What's your assessment then?" he mused, sitting up and pulling the knife out. I might have been crazy, but I thought I saw blue sparks when he did, and I noticed that there was a hole in his pants despite there no longer being wound.

“Not a threat,” she responded simply.

“Good. Also, tell Markos he can go fuck himself. That hurt, you know.”

“Sorry…” she murmured as she slowly sank into his lap to hug him tightly. She hid her face in his neck and balled his shirt in her fists. I wasn’t sure if she was crying or not when he returned the hug, holding her just as close.

“It’s good to see you…” he whispered, but when she didn’t let go, he added, “Calla… You know the ground is cold, right?”

The girl reluctantly got up, letting him go. “No, I can’t feel it…” she apologized.

“It’s okay,” he assured her as they stood, then he looked back over to me. “Claire, this is Calla.”

“Is it safe? I-I mean is she safe?” I asked, trying not to sound as afraid as I still was. Honestly, I was just trying to make sense of the situation and ignore the things I couldn’t understand.

“Do you have any further orders?” Eric asked her firmly, to which she shook her head. “She’s not going to hurt you.”

“She tried to kill us on the mountain,” I corrected him anxiously.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I only wanted you to run back to Eric. But the snow started moving quite quickly downward… I wasn’t expecting that.” Calla spoke directly to me then. Her voice was strangely soft and calming.

“You could have just asked us about him if you’re friends!” I countered.

At this, Calla looked to Eric for a translation, and he seemed at a loss for how to explain the concept of asking to her. Eventually, it seemed like he was about to speak when there was an explosion down the street. We all turned in horror as my brother’s apartment burst into flames.

“Charles!” I screamed in a panic as I forced my injured ankle to support me so I could run back towards the apartment.

“Was this you!?” Eric shouted at Calla.

“No,” she answered sedately as if nothing at all were wrong.

“Then stay with Claire. Stop her from hurting herself, be gentle about it,” he told her quickly, and as he took off running for the apartment. Calla

caught my waist, she was smaller than I am, and yet surprisingly strong. Fat tears spilled over my cheeks as I struggled against her grip.

“Let go of me! My brother is in there!” I yelled, trying to pry her arms off.

“Eric wishes for you to remain here,” she responded calmly, apparently entirely unfazed by my efforts.

Eric disappeared into the flames, and I desperately searched for the smallest sign of Charles. Smoke billowed out of the living room window, and the floor above was also on fire. I knew that wasn’t good. I could hear fire truck sirens coming from a few streets over, but that did nothing to calm me. It seemed like an agonizingly long time before Eric came back out, and when he did, he was alone, coughing on smoke.

“Where is he?! Eric!” I begged for an answer despite already knowing what it would be.

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Chapter 22
We Keep Humans as *‘Pets’*

Markos Bellerose: July, 1919 - 1930.

“Markos, can you hurry up and just *Pick One*? The crying gives me a headache, and you’ve already got six of them. Do you really need another?” Nathaniel complained with an exasperated sigh. He looked mildly inconvenienced, and I can’t say that didn’t please me. We were making our way through the nursery of a brothel somewhere in Korea in 1919. I forget where exactly. It was warm, humid, and grimy. A layer of dampened dust coated nearly every surface, and the children all screamed for their parents.

I tried to sympathize with them. Their assigned caretaker lay dead in the corner, her blood smeared on the walls and seeped slowly into the cracks between the floor tiles. She should never have tried to fight us; we had asked so politely for entry into the establishment, though I suppose there may have been some kind of language barrier. Regardless, with the distance the nursery was built into the forest, it was likely that no one would hear them crying or come to tend to the infants for the remainder of the day.

“I would like to choose ten this time; you can’t rush these decisions. You know very well that none may survive the training,” I told him patiently. He was young and impulsive. He didn’t understand the process. Choosing a pet is an important decision as they will remain with you for the rest of their lives and serve your every need. I suppose I should have considered myself lucky to have such a noble escort for the Choosing. However, we had been friends for so long that it was only natural that he should accompany me.

This was the third Choosing I had participated in; the previous ones had not been successful. You see, it’s very difficult to judge the will of an infant. However, any older and they may pick up unwanted habits. Of course, I tended to make choices based on aesthetics, so perhaps that’s where the fault lay.

“We’ve been to hundreds of places. It can’t be this hard to choose,” he muttered impatiently.

“Why don’t you choose one for yourself, *‘your highness’*?” I teased him, giving him a mock bow.

“Don’t call me that. It’s not even accurate,” Nathaniel responded, irritated, his ears warming with embarrassment. “I don’t want a pet. I’ve told you, and Father, and a hundred other people, that I won’t partake in such an idiotic tradition.”

“Your genetics leave you little choice if you are to have children,” I reminded him, to which he glared back at me contemptuously.

“I’m not going to have children,” he stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

“You will change your mind,” I mused confidently. He was barely a man, too young to be making statements like that.

“I won’t.”

“I think you’re just afraid you won’t be good at choosing. Your brother chose well on his first try. His pet seems well-adjusted; I think she will make it through.”

“He chose fifty of them. *Of course* one would survive,” Nathaniel scoffed.

“Two have survived thus far, actually.”

“Whatever. We both know he prefers Molly,” he stated nonchalantly as he stopped beside a crib, “Markos. I think you would like this one.”

“Oh?” I’ll admit I was curious. This was the first time he had made any kind of suggestion. Moving over to stand beside him, I wasn’t sure what to expect. I thought that he might be playing a trick on me. That was until I looked into the crib. There lay an infant girl with blonde hair. She was clothed in little more than rags crying so hard that her eyes were screwed shut and her white eyelashes clumped together. She stood out infinitely from any of the other black-haired children.

“Another albino?” I asked, curious as I picked her up to try and soothe her. I won’t lie; her unusual appearance had already made the decision for me. I’m something of a collector, and all of my other choices had also been based on rarity.

“No, I believe it’s Leucism. Her eyes are still pigmented,” Nathaniel corrected.

“How can you be sure?”

“They were open when I approached. She only started crying after I looked at her.”

“Aww, is that so little one? Don’t worry. Nathaniel makes all the ladies cry,” I spoke to the child, rocking her back and forth until she quietened, “That’s better.”

“If you’ve made your choice, can we go now?” he prompted, not acknowledging my playful comment.

In return, I ignored him, “Baek Kyung-ja,” I read the name tag for the girl. “That’s an ugly name; we’ll call you Calla from now on, yes we will~” I nuzzled her nose with mine. Baby humans like that, and bonding is a critical part of raising a pet. She looked up at me with wide brown eyes devoid of recognition. She clearly wasn’t happy to be held by a stranger, but she would get used to it with time.

“Callu, Cally, Callé, Callo, Calle, Callí. I thought you were going to run out of letters,” he taunted, rolling his eyes as I spoke in a baby tone to the girl.

“I *did* run out of English letters,” I admitted as we made our way out.

Unfortunately, we happened to come face to face with a man returning to check on the nursery. He noticed us, saw Calla in my arms, and started to shout in a language I didn’t care to understand.

“Can you take care of that?” I asked Nathaniel, gesturing to him that I was with child, and simply couldn’t do anything. He looked at me dejected but pulled the sword from his waist nonetheless to handle the situation.

***

Once the Choosing is complete, the children are handed over to Ávila and her husband, who will be their caregivers, and ensure their every need is met. These little humans will become our companions, so it is important that they are well provided for. They will be dressed, fed, and bathed by servants for the entirety of their lives. It is necessary that they are compliant in this process, and any child who makes too much fuss about it will be retired to the meat farms.

The infants age quickly, and before you realize it, they are walking and talking. At this stage, they are moved to the crèche. It is a large, padded

room, complete with set heating and plush flooring. These rooms are designed so that children of the same age are grouped together, and they will sleep in there as they please, though typically, they bunch together. This eliminates the need for blankets or bedding and allows the caretakers to leave them unsupervised during the night.

It is traditional that they should remain in the crèche until they are assigned officially to their masters. Still, I made sure to visit all of mine at least once a day, although Calla was already my preferred as she looked the best in the dresses I bought for them.

We discovered some time ago that taking the children around with us can promote bonding. As such, I would often take Calla for walks through the halls and gardens. It was an activity that coincided well with my daily duties, and as Nathaniel often joined us, it allowed me the opportunity to speak freely with him while Calla played among the foliage.

“Your brother seems more stressed these days?” I commented.

“Perhaps. Since Father’s last visit, he has become quite determined that the institute should increase its patient limit. He’s obsessed with increasing the supply of meat and contracts. He’s even sending me out to collect from orphanages,” he grumbled, laying back on the grass to look up at the sky.

“Too much work for you?” I jested.

“Way too much,” He agreed with a laugh as he looked over to me, “How are your pets fairing?”

“Mmm~ Cally failed her obedience test.”

“She was the first or the second albino?”

“The second one. The first, Callu, is still quite promising.”

“Ah, and the others?”

“Well, Callo failed the intelligence test. Callí failed all three of her combat tests, so I had her put down, and Calle was mistakenly beheaded… So now I am down to only three.” I explained.

“But this one is your favorite?”

“Indeed she is,” I smiled, “She is ma Petite Poupée. She wears everything I ask the caregivers to give her and is top of the class for combat.”

Nathaniel looked about to answer when we were interrupted. “Master Markos! Master Markos! Look! I brought you a flower.” Calla announced from across the garden, her dress fluttering out behind her as she ran back over to us. She stopped in a rush of fabric, her cheeks flush from the effort and her hair tangled with twigs.

“I can see that,” I said plainly. I didn’t want to encourage this kind of useless behavior, but I also didn’t want to discourage her affection.

“I brought one for you too, Lord Nathaniel,” she stated delightfully, offering him a second flower.

“No, thank you,” he responded calmly, “Although, I’m sure Markos would like two.”

In response, the girl looked to me unsurely. This was a good sign; it meant that she was more willing to follow my instruction than his.

“I would love two,” I encouraged, and she smiled broadly. Of course, I had to punish her immediately. I hit her with the back of my hand across the face, though I was careful not to break skin. She looked surprised for a moment, tears welled in her eyes, but she obediently sat down on her knees. “You know you mustn’t smile.” I reminded her.

“I’m very sorry,” she apologized, keeping her head down. The caregivers had taught her well, but not well enough to strip the emotion from her yet.

“It’s fine,” I sighed. I considered then that perhaps she wouldn’t make it through the training. They test for emotions, and I was sure she would fail if I didn’t correct her consistently. “Go now. ***Back to your room, don’t delay*** ,” I instructed, and she hurried to follow the order, holding her cheek as she did.

“Did you have to hit her?” Nathaniel asked, I shouldn’t have been surprised. He had always been weak in that way. He believed the humans shouldn’t suffer. He even convinced his brother that ‘stressed meat tasted bad’ so that the livestock were treated with care. Some days it bothered me that he was granted the power he had by virtue of his birth.

“Have you ever trained a pet, Nathaniel? They don’t listen to simple words alone. You must punish them as necessary.”

“I would take a different approach,” he stated simply as he got up. “Achaicus is looking for me. If you see him, don’t mention that you’ve seen me. I don’t want to deal with him today.”

“As you wish,” I agreed as if I had any choice in the matter. As someone who outranked me, I was intended to do as he asked. Our society runs off power. The more power you have, the higher your standing. At one time, many centuries ago, we were ruled by a single family. However, when the patriarch of that family died, the monarchy fell apart.

Many had been willing to follow him, only him, and they didn’t accept his heirs as legitimate. When he passed, several families demanded their own independence, and it so happened that Achaicus and Nathaniel’s ancestor was one of those few. You see, their family possesses abilities that surpass many of us. It’s legend that their relative eliminated twelve of the other families, and the remaining eight noble families fell into line. He agreed to allow them their own governance, and his sons followed that lead for generations.

They are not exactly royal. However, the power they wield is unrivaled, and the consequences of it still echo through the generations. Many other families sought that same power, and it was discovered that similar results could be achieved through selective breeding. No one realized until it was too late the cost.

Females who represented the genes were unable to give birth safely. Miscarriages are extremely common, and many fae women died. That, in combination with our preference for male heirs, meant our entire species nearly became extinct. Those of us now, who have the gene, have few choices when it comes to mates. Nathaniel and Achaicus, like myself, will have to breed with humans if we are to have any hope of continuing our lineage.

The fastest solution was to take female humans of breeding age, but untrained human women proved too… *difficult*. They rebelled against advances, learned and exploited weaknesses, killed themselves, or our children. Some even had the audacity to escape and bring back an entire town of iron-welding barbarians. It was chaos. My great-grandmother was one of these women, and she killed my great-grandfather with an iron pike.

This is how it became necessary for us to create ‘pets’. While they are children, as repulsive as they are, they can be trained, and won’t rebel against us later. Any who show signs that they may cause trouble can be dealt with swiftly as they are no threat at that age. Of course, there have been some mistakes made in their raising over the decades.

For example, we tried keeping them isolated from one another initially. However, that had significant negative effects on their psychology. One entire Choosing was ruined as all the children became extremely anxious and melancholy. Similarly, we found that they were in constant need of stimulation. Unlike our own children, who can be left unattended for hours without problem, the human children developed behavioral issues where they became most unruly. As a result, several of them had to be put down as they were unmanageable.

***

In the years that followed my Choosing, I found myself faced with a problem. You see, they had reached the age of ten, yet three still remained. Calla, Callu and Callé. Each had their own unique qualities; Callé had vitiligo, and she was compliant and malleable. Callu was intelligent and could anticipate my needs excellently. While Calla was still top of her class in combat, and extremely placid.

I had hoped that the acceptance test, in which we show each of them the slaughterhouse where we process our humayne meat, would break one of them. They needed to take marked distress to the situation to be eliminated. However, while each reacted variably, all were minimal responses. Callu seemed a little shaken by the experience, though blood did splash on her. Callé didn’t respond at all, and Calla became very quiet.

It is not permitted that anyone may have more than one pet past the age of ten as the risk they pose increases. I would have to make a choice on which two would be terminated. In this matter, I chose to seek Achaicus’s help as he had been faced with a similar situation in his own Choosing. I arrived at his office early and knocked before entering.

He was at his desk looking over paperwork with a drink in hand. Molly sat gracefully beside his desk, perfectly still as if she were part of the furniture. She was indeed well trained. She graduated when she was only nineteen years of age. This is significant as, typically, they didn’t graduate until twenty. However, she was exceptional.

“Achaicus,” I greeted him with a polite bow as I was expected to.

“What do you want?” he asked bluntly.

“If I might, I was hoping to ask your advice on a certain predicament,” I broached the subject carefully.

“What is it..?” I could tell he was apprehensive. I rarely asked this twin for anything.

“You had two candidates for your pet past the age of ten. How did you choose which to keep?”

At this, he seemed tense, and his eyes flicked to Molly. *It was odd,* I thought. He looked at her as if she was some kind of security for him. “I told her I had to choose…” he said carefully, “... And then I made the decision.”

“Is that all?” I was skeptical.

“Yes,” he responded. I could tell he was lying, though I couldn’t imagine what it was about.

“Very well,” I agreed. It was not my place to argue with him, “Have you seen your brother of late?” I asked now. I hadn’t seen Nathaniel close at hand for some months.

“Yes, I sent him away to collect children from orphanages. He’s busy with that. If you mean to pose the same question to him, I’m afraid he would be of little use. He still insists that he will not choose a pet.”

“Of course. I was only concerned as the last time I saw him; he seemed to be in rather low spirits.”

Achaicus groaned in annoyance, “Yes. My little brother was quite enthusiastic about one of the orphans he had met. Apparently, it died, and he has been profoundly upset over it. I cannot understand why.”

It was easy to draw information from Achaicus, especially when he was drinking. “Should we be concerned?”

“No. He’ll come out of it. Now, if that’s all..?” he gestured to the door for me to leave.

I did as I was bid and left while allowing my mind to wander. I had known both the twins since they were children. Achaicus was the firstborn, and while they were each unique in personality, they were also near impossible to distinguish physically. Mere minutes separated them in age; nonetheless the eldest was always the strongest, and the younger one was

little more than a spare. Second-born sons are more useless than daughters in our society.

They will inherit no lands, titles, or social standing and have little political value. If they had not been born together, the second would never have been born at all. As it were, there was once talk of disposing of the extra. However, it was around this time that Nathaniel became inexplicably more capable. It's said he fought off the would-be assassin single-handedly and earned his place. However, I have my doubts as to how accurate that is.

On the way, I passed Ávila in the halls and requested that she bring my three pets to the gardens. I had not yet made a choice, but I knew it was best to make it sooner rather than later, as it would only become more difficult with time. I had hoped that seeing them all lined up before me, I would be able to decide. Unfortunately, I was incorrect.

The three girls were neatly arranged. Callé and Callu were on either end while Calla, as the shortest, stood in between the two. They watched me with flat eyes, none of them showing any emotion. I hadn't expected it to be so difficult to decide. "My little pets, you have all done so well. However, the time has come that I may only choose one of you. Now, I have already chosen." I lied, and none of them responded, so I continued, "I have decided to choose none of you. I will wait again for the next Choosing. What are your opinions? Should I change my mind? You may speak freely."

Callé and Callu looked at one another unsurely over the top of Calla, "I… Think you should choose one of us…" Callu said softly.

"So do I…" Callé seconded the notion.

"And you, Calla?" I requested calmly.

In response, the girl knelt, "It's not my place to give an opinion. The decision is not mine. My desires are of no consequence," she murmured, keeping her gaze low. Her answer surprised me somewhat.

"I see," I mused as I took the sword from my belt to raise it over her. Calla didn't so much as flinch as I cut down the two other girls. I granted them quick deaths, despite their insolence in assuming they could tell me their opinions. A red mist sprayed in the air as I cut their jugular veins, and their bodies crumpled on either side of my chosen one, their blood soaking into the grass. They gurgled for a few moments before their feeble struggling ceased, then I offered Calla my hand to assist her up.

She took it gently and stood as I directed, “Don’t disappoint me now, ma Petite Poupée,” I warned her casually, and she nodded in acknowledgment. Perhaps she would pass the emotions test after all, for not even the faintest flicker crossed her expression. Then I realized what I had done with a start of annoyance, “Your dress! I’ve ruined it! Those blood stains will never come out.”

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Chapter 23
Living on Cursed Land

Robert B. Clark: February, 1945.

The farm had been in my family for three generations. Located in northern Missouri, it’s a beautiful ranch. Or, well, it was. We started off farming cattle. But something kept eating them, and when raising cows became more akin to feeding the local wildlife, we switched to farming crops. Corn, soybeans, and cotton, depending on the season. That seemed to calm things down.

I wasted most of my days shooting at inanimate objects, or anything that moved, and moonshining. Met my wife at church, back when I still had faith. God she was beautiful, a natural blonde with rosy cheeks and a talent for sewing. That woman could mend anything. We had two kids, Thomas and Evelyn, I never got to tell them, but they were great kids.

They left with my wife and refused contact with me. I would have liked for Thomas to take over the farm one day. But he lives in Maine now, and I haven’t spoken to him in years. I think he even has a daughter, little baby Diane. I’ve never met her, never will. He named her after his mother. See, I was a different person back when my family was around.

Thought I was tough. Turns out I was just stupid, and by the time I came around, it was too late. They were long gone. I was a mean drunk, and I drank often. I have so many regrets, and there are some mistakes that there’s no forgiveness for, some scars run too deep. It got lonely sometimes. There’s a lot of work for one person, and at night, well… At night, you stay indoors on the farm. Don’t open that door for no voices or commotion you hear. Just drink until you don’t hear ‘em.

Anyway, it was the middle of February 1945, the snow was on its way to melting off, and I had work to get done in preparation for the next season. I had spent the day out mending fences, didn’t want no trespassers, and when I got back to the house, I could tell something was off. The chickens were going berserk, and my horse anxiously turned around on me more than once, making it clear that she was spooked.

Ahead of us the barn door was slightly ajar and initially, I assumed I left it open by mistake. Maybe a coyote or bear had wandered in. So I grabbed my shotgun and then went to investigate. I nudged the door open cautiously with the gun barrel and peered inside. Sunlight filtered in through cracks between the timber boards in slivers, creating an array of intermittent light into the dim interior.

Nothing seemed out of place. All the tools still hung on the walls, and I was certain everything was messy like I had left it, not messy like something had rummaged through. It took me a moment to notice the rust-colored smears in the dust, and as I looked closer, I realized it was blood.

That gave me the willies. Not too many animals creep into a barn bleeding to hide. I reckon I was so tense I could have crushed walnuts with my ass. I removed the safety on my gun and spoke up. “You going to come out, or am I going to start shooting until I find you?”

No response.

I held off firing and stepped inside cautiously, tracking the blood trail to see if I could get an angle on the intruder. When I believed I was close, I followed it with my eyes only. Didn’t want to get too near. I found the unwelcome visitor crouched behind some feed barrels.

There was an old mirror toward the back there, it was tarnished and cracked, but through it, I could see him lean back to watch me approach. He was young, late teens or early twenties. If I had to guess, I would have said eighteen or nineteen, all youngins look about the same when you get to my age, so it was hard to tell.

However, what I could say for certain, was that he held a sword in his left hand and was ready to attack. That surprised me. I hadn’t seen anyone carrying a sword since the wars, and even then it was rare, most were bayonets instead. Either way, not willing to risk it, I decided to take aim. “Drop the weapon, kid. This is the only chance I’ll give,” I warned.

A look of confusion crossed his face, then annoyance as he spotted the mirror and realization dawned. He made no move to follow the instructions, so I let off a warning shot. The bullet hit near, and ricocheted off the steel barrel beside him, splintering the wooden pillar ahead.

His expression then was one of pure shock, as if he had never before known of a gun. He covered his ears from the sound, and I supposed that

was probably enough to scare him. “Come out,” I repeated, and I could see him think this time. Weighing up his options before moving.

“Alright… Just, don’t do that again. I don’t mean to harm you.”

When he spoke his voice was strange. Not un-American exactly, but softer than expected with slightly rolled r’s. It was almost similar to German, but I had heard German accents before, and this wasn’t it. Moreover, the English was so American in expression that it confused me. I honestly couldn’t say what it was, but I assumed it was foreign.

“Easy does it. Come out slowly, hands up. No sword,” I instructed.

My directions seemed to bother him distinctly, but he followed the orders carefully. He allowed the sword to drop from his hand and limped slightly as he stood to face me with his hands raised. Looking at him then, I assumed he was some kind of transient. He was too thin, covered in dirt and blood which trickled slowly down his side to drip onto the ground.

It was obvious someone had beaten the hell out of him, and his clothes were unusual; to say the least. Like those of fancy folk you see in museums, only entirely worn out, torn, and dirty. I wondered if he had stolen them. His eyes were a deep blue, and his dark hair was messily brought forward to obscure his right eye. On his right hand, he wore a long glove that covered his arm all the way to just past the elbow. But even so, I could still tell it was heavily bruised.

“What’s your name, son?”

The boy hesitated, and I raised the gun. He drew a sharp breath as he squared up, expecting to be shot. “It’s Eric,” he stated finally through his teeth.

“Well, Eric, where are you from?”

“Georgia,” he answered quickly.

“That so? That’s just north of here, right?”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I was sure he didn’t even know where Georgia was. “It’s in the south, boy,” I informed him, and I could tell he was nervous as he glanced down at his sword. “Uh-uh. Leave it,” I told him firmly.

“If you’re going to kill me, just do it. Don’t play games,” he snapped back.

That was a bit extreme. I realized then that he was more afraid than I had initially thought. In fact, I wasn’t sure if he’d even taken another breath since the first. “You can breathe. You’re alright,” I assured now.

“Am I?” he asked bitterly, watching me with suspicion as I slowly lowered the gun.

“It looks like you could use some help. But I don’t want to hear any more lies, alright?”

“I’m fine. I don’t need help,” Eric muttered. He reminded me of myself when I was younger. I didn’t need help neither. However, the color draining from his face made it apparent that he was close to passing out, and I was just beginning to wonder how much longer he would hold up when he fell.

***

While he was out, I called in my neighbor, Josie, to check him over and patch him up. She was a widowed nurse, and a good friend, so I trusted her.

“The kid is pretty banged up, Robert. Did you beat him?” she asked me sternly.

“What? No!” I answered innocently, “He just showed up in the barn like that.”

She glared at me for a long moment, staring directly into my soul before she seemed to believe me. “Alright. You want me to call the Sheriff's Office?”

“Nah, I don’t need them cops coming around, poking through my stuff.”

“What will you do then?”

“I’ll talk to him when he wakes up. I could use a farm hand for a bit,” I grinned.

“Make sure you pay him fairly then. I’ll bring around a pie in a few days, alright?” Josie had an unyielding way with words that made it difficult to argue.

“Yes ma’am,” I agreed, “And ahh… Thank you. For you know, I’m not much of a doctor.”

“You’re welcome! Call me if he gives you any trouble. I’ll come right over and give him a piece of my mind,” she assured me.

I couldn’t help but smile at that. What a woman.

***

I reckon the boy didn’t wake up for another day or two. I found his cane in the barn and hid the sword. But other than that, he seemed to have nothing else with him. I was sitting in the kitchen reading the newspaper when the floorboards creaked, and I looked up to see him standing in the doorway.

“ ‘bout time you got up,” I commented as I resumed reading. Frankly, he had startled me, creeping up so quietly like that. If the house hadn’t been on my side, I doubt I would have noticed his approach at all.

He didn’t say anything, and after a moment, I realized he wasn’t going to. He just stood uneasily waiting, as if he wasn’t sure what to do. “You don’t talk much, do you?” I commented, “Well, don’t just stand there. Come, sit down, and have some breakfast. There’s eggs, bread, cheese, oranges. Take your pick.”

“Why?” he demanded.

“Because you look like you haven’t eaten in days,” I answered simply.

“No. I mean, why help me?” Eric asked more quietly as he picked at his bandages and avoided my gaze.

I immediately felt awkward, “It’s just what you do. You see someone that needs help. You help them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not for free. So don’t you worry about that. You owe me some work on the farm.”

“I don’t know anything about farm work.”

“I’ll teach you,” I assured him, “Now eat; you’ll need your strength.”

It was bizarre, but for a moment, it looked like he was going to sit on the floor. So I pushed out the chair opposite me with my foot for him to take instead, and he finally moved to join me. He ate like a starved dog, went

through half a dozen eggs and an entire loaf of bread. All without any kind of flavoring, not even salt.

When he was done, he spoke. “Where’s my sword?”

“Hidden somewhere safely. Consider it a security payment until you work off your debt.”

“Security payment?” he asked, confused.

“You know. So that you don’t run off.”

“Right,” I could tell the concept was unfamiliar to him.

After breakfast, I showed him around the farm. The chickens didn’t like him at first, never seen them run so fast from something, but they came around with a bit of corn. He looked lost when I showed him how to spread it for them. It was obvious he had never done a day's work in his life. The horses were equally uneasy, and I couldn’t get them to come in from the yard.

“Why do you keep all these animals?” he queried eventually.

“They’re working animals,” I explained, before realizing he probably didn’t know what that meant. “Like… pets, but they serve a purpose. You never had no pet growing up?”

At this, his expression turned rather cynical, “No. I never had a ‘pet’.”

***

Over the next few days, he seemed to regain his strength rapidly. By the time Josie came around with the pie she’d promised, he was essentially in full health again. I allowed him to use my son’s room, and he stayed for quite some time. Weeks passed; he helped me in the fields with the crops. But never did speak much about where he came from, wouldn’t even tell me so much as his family name, but that was alright.

It didn’t concern me, for the fact of it is, I was just glad to have him there. He was my second chance at raising a son. I taught him how to manage the farm. At first, I assumed he wouldn’t be able to do all that much, since his right arm was damaged by a birth defect or something. I didn’t ask much about that either. But he proved remarkably capable.

After three months, I decided to give his sword back and came to find his room empty the following morning. Disappointment sat heavy in my gut when I realized he was gone. I had at least expected that he would say goodbye. The dull ache of pain filled my chest; my family before him had left the same way; without any warning. However, as I sat outside thinking about it, I heard metal hitting something and went to investigate.

To my surprise, I found Eric beating the stuffing out of a scarecrow. He may not have known the first thing about tractors and crops, or seed and animals, but I realized immediately that he was specialty trained with that sword. Thinking back to the first time I had met him and was glad I had the shotgun on me. If I had allowed him to take up his weapon, I'm sure he would have cut me in two.

"You're up early?" he commented as he tilted the blade downward.

"And you're very good there with that sword," I responded.

"Not that good. My friend Calla is better."

"You ever going to tell me where you came from?"

He smiled slightly, "North."

"Very funny," I stated flatly.

His unwillingness to give details about himself was only one of the many strange things about him. For example, he slept on the covers of his bed rather than under them. He refused to eat meat and had little idea of practical knowledge, while simultaneously having a firm grasp on combat skills beyond my understanding.

I confided all of this to Josie, and she suggested he had escaped from some kind of gang or another. However, I doubted that was the case, for there were other things I didn't tell her. I never mentioned how fast he had recovered from his injuries or how strong he was. I understand that he was young and fit, and that I'm no spring chicken. But he once lifted the tractor with one hand to remove a stick that had become caught under it, and it seemed to take him little effort. Rather he was surprised to learn that I couldn't do it. The little shit even had the nerve to taunt me about it. Told me I was just old.

Similarly, I ignored one overshadowing fact. Since his arrival, there had been no unusual activity on the farm. Not one eerie voice beckoning you to come out into the dark forest, nor any other kind of commotion. This lot of

chickens was the longest-lived I'd ever had. More often than not, I would awake to find my flock slaughtered after a night of harrowing bird screaming, not this bunch, not while Eric was around.

There were only three probable reasons for this. The first was that he was somehow protecting the estate. The second was that his presence was scaring everything *else* away. And the third was the most unsettling - perhaps he *was* the thing that called to me in the darkness. Like so many other abnormalities, I stubbornly turned a blind eye to this possibility. That was until one evening in early October.

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Chapter 24
Sacrifice

Robert B. Clark: October, 1945.

Eric didn’t much like the summer heat, he preferred to work the farm at night and sleep during the day. Can’t say I understood why, or how, he was able to work in the pitch-black. But all the jobs were done by morning, so I couldn’t complain. Nevertheless, the weather was changing, trees were beginning to lose their leaves, and the corn fields were drying out, ready for harvest. This was always the worst time of the year for unusual activity, and I was surprised we had made it so far into the month without any.

As the weather cooled the boy became more active during the day again, and it was on our way back to the house after inspecting the crop that I began to feel watched. A cold sensation washed over me, and I looked back to see an abnormally large buck. At first glance, it appeared normal. Its antlers were silhouetted against the dim sky, and it stood perfectly still atop the hill not all that far from us. Eric must have noticed it too, for he pushed the hair back from his face to get a better look at it.

In all the time I had spent with him, I had never known him to do that before. Under his hair, the eye was strange. Purple and almost cat-like with no visible whites. I might have been going senile, but it seemed to me that he was looking at the deer specifically with that eye, and that the animal was looking back at him with just as much purpose.

“What *is* that?” he muttered under his breath. I couldn’t tell if he was talking to me or not; regardless, he didn’t give me a chance to answer before he started moving. The boy drew his sword, heading directly toward the creature as he did, and in return, it let out a long bellow.

“Whoa hey! Don’t, boy!” I said quickly as I moved to stop him. I grabbed hold of his arm and held firm. I’ve lived on the lands long enough to know that this was the kind of thing that you were supposed to ignore. Natives say that acknowledging them in any way gives them power, and I would say that running directly at it was a form of recognition.

“What are you doing? Can’t you see it?” he demanded.

“Listen to me carefully, boy. I don’t see nothing, and *you* don’t see anything neither.”

Eric took a moment to calculate the intent of my statement before he understood what I was saying. “If that’s the case. We should return to the house, immediately,” he stated calmly.

“Indeed we should,” I agreed, not realizing that it was already in vain. Behind us, the thing screamed. Its pitch changed from a low animal tone to the shrill shriek of a woman, and it took everything in me not to run. I realized too late that the boy wasn’t following me. The little shit had lied to me and turned back to face the thing.

It shambled toward us while Eric stood ready with weapon in hand. As it drew near, I could see more detail. Beneath the outward appearance of the deer was a gaunt creature with hollowed cheeks and gray skin. It didn’t have any eyes, but pinpoints of light shone unnaturally from the empty sockets. However, its most disturbing feature was the mouth. Not located on its face as any of god's creatures, but rather it was inserted into the open cavity of its throat.

Up close, the fucker was bigger than I was expecting, and to make matters worse it slowly, painstakingly, stood up unnaturally on two legs. It towered over Eric, and I knew there was nothing I could do to help him. The boy was arrogant, and he was going to die, or so I thought.

To my surprise, he moved quickly and met the creature more equally than I had expected. They fought rapidly, crushing my corn plants in the process, and I stood by uselessly. The thing attacked with hungry movements. It was predatory and hunting, while Eric was cautious and trained.

He ran it through with the sword, and blood spilled freely onto the ground. I hoped it was over then. But the creature recovered. It regarded Eric for a long moment before it let out another tremendous screech and began to retreat while the boy stood unflinching.

It melted back into the rows of corn, and as Eric moved to pursue it, a cacophony of sound erupted around us. There were voices, *dozens* of voices. All speaking at once, some screaming incomprehensible sounds while others pleaded for help in disjointed sentences with alternating pitch

and tone. I could taste fear in the back of my throat as I realized just how many there were, and how *close* they were.

“We need to get back inside. Now,” Eric stated firmly as he backed up toward me, scanning the area immediately around us as he did. I don’t want to know what he could see, but *I* couldn’t see anything more than a few feet in front of my face.

By some miracle, we made it back to the house and barricaded the doors. We sat up all night as the things prowled outside, calling for us to come out in a thousand different voices, and speaking in another language. Occasionally the wooden boards of the porch creaked, straining under weight as one would come up onto it to look in through a window.

Eric stood by the front door for most of the night, listening and deep in thought. They gave up at sunrise, and we went out to inspect the damage. To my surprise the house wasn’t damaged. But that was the only blessing. The year's crops were destroyed, ripped apart, and crushed for hours. Likewise, the animals were in much the same condition.

I shouldn’t have let the boy look. I knew what he would find. It wasn’t the first lot I had lost. However, its effect on him was profound, and he was even more emotionless than usual. “They were just animals,” I assured him.

“No. You warned me to ignore the creature, and I disobeyed. This is my fault,” he murmured. The way his gaze was fixated on the forest made me nervous.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself; this kind of thing happens every year.”

He paused then, “It happens regularly? How often? And for how long?”

That made me think, “Been going on for decades. It happens every now and then, but more so during harvest season.”

“And how do you usually defend your property?”

“Bullets,” I answered simply, then remembered; “My father always insisted we use silver bullets.”

“Silver…” he said softly mostly to himself, “I need my cane.”

He began to limp his way back inside, and I followed after him baffled. What good would his cane do against those things? When I caught up to him, he was seated and twisting the top off the cane. “What are you-” I

started but stopped as I realized he was pulling a second sword from the inside of the stick.

“This one is silver. The steel didn’t work because it wasn’t the right substance,” he explained, sounding bemused.

“Was that in there the whole time?” I asked, disregarding the rest.

He looked at me then with a slightly guilty expression and a sly smile, “Yes… I also found the one you hid from me within hours. But I allowed you to think I was unarmed; it seemed to make you feel more comfortable.”

“Is there anything else you’re keeping from me, you little shit?” I asked, using an annoyed tone to cover my embarrassment. If he intended to harm me, I was sure he would have done it by now.

“Plenty more.”

“What do you think you can do with that toothpick then?” I demanded.

“It’s not a toothpick. But it is delicate, so I can’t do too much with it, and we’ll need more silver than this. Do you have any bullets left?”

“Haven’t had any for years. No one melts down silver these days.”

Eric didn’t respond as he began to search on his own. He returned shortly after with a candlestick, a bag of coins, and the old mirror out the barn. Couldn’t see what he planned on doing with those things, but I waited patiently as he worked. First, he polished the mirror, converting it into a shield. Then packed gunpowder with the silver coins into bottles and sharpened the edges of the candlestick.

“You sure all that silver will work?” I asked skeptically, folding my arms as I rested against the door frame.

“I hope so,” he mused.

“How do you know how to do all that there, stuff anyway?”

“I was taught.”

“You were taught how to make all of that, but you weren’t taught what a gun is?”

“They don’t use guns,” he stated vaguely.

“But they use gunpowder?”

“They don’t call it ‘gunpowder’.”

“What do ‘*they*’ call it?”

Eric hesitated uncertainly, before answering, “…Serpentine.”

“Who exactly were these people that taught you?” I asked, trying to sound casual. Serpentine is an old term. I didn’t expect him to know it.

“It doesn’t matter who they were,” he responded with some hostility.

“Boy. I might not know much. But I know a beat dog flinches like you do whenever I ask.”

“I’m not a dog,” he snapped back, and I knew I had pushed the issue too far.

“Alright, alright. I don’t mean to offend you,” I assured, putting my hands up innocently.

“Then stop asking,” he stated with venom.

“Look, I ain’t one to give much advice… But if you keep carrying that anger and hate inside, it’ll eat away at you until you don’t know who you are anymore. Believe me. There are better solutions.” I felt as awkward saying it as I’m sure he did hearing it, but it seemed to calm him.

He sighed, still clearly irritated. “I’m fine, and you don’t need to say things like that. I’m going to find those creatures now. Stay here, and I’ll be back soon.”

Eric stood, and when he did, he no longer had a limp. Rather, he seemed to have an aura around him. His hair moved as if ruffled by a breeze and I could feel energy radiating off him.

“You’re not going alone; I ain’t gonna just sit here,” I decided.

“You’re too weak to face them.”

“Alright, you shit. You might be younger and stronger, but I still have some life left in these old bones,” I retorted ruefully.

“Not much life left if you come with me.”

“Well, we’ll just see then, won’t we.”

Admittedly I was underprepared comparatively. I didn’t have no silver with me or anything, just my shotgun. But I was sure being pumped with lead would still hurt them. He looked at me exasperated, and after some hesitation, handed me the mirror-shield and candlestick.

“Let’s at least pretend you’ll make it.”

“You have an attitude about you; did you know that?” I muttered, taking the equipment as I did.

“It’s been mentioned before.”

***

Eric led the way and we set off on foot toward the forest. It seemed as if he was tracking something, though I couldn’t say what, when he stopped. In the near distance was a coyote. It made eye contact with us, then hurried over the hill, and, to my grief, Eric ran after it.

“That’s a coyote, boy!” I called after him as I scrambled to keep up.

“No! It’s one of them!” he shouted back without slowing.

He chased the thing into the forest, and I caught only a few glimpses of him moving agilely through the trees before I lost sight of them. I was beginning to regret my decision to come along. I was out of breath and deep in the forest. The sun was dimmer beneath the foliage, and the eerie sound of inhuman screams echoed through the woods.

Against my better judgment, those sounds were precisely what I chose to follow, and as I drew closer, the voices became clearer. Each sentence was disjointed, and the variations in tone and pitch made it difficult to differentiate one speaker from another. However, one voice stood out more clearly above the rest.

“Enough. Speak one at a time, or don’t talk to me at all,” Eric said firmly.

I entered the clearing to find him standing reasonably close to the creatures. Each one towered over him, their skins draping loosely over their forms. The largest of them was crouched submissively, and the others lingered close by in a semicircle around him.

Eric was breathing heavily; the front of his shirt was torn and blood-soaked. He had sustained a critical injury, but he still stood unrelenting, his sword directed at the creature before him. The blade steamed as the blood on its surface boiled, and the large monster had a matching wound to its shoulder that sizzled ominously. I recognized it as the one he had fought with the night before, and its chest injury appeared to have healed.

When they noticed me, a new commotion erupted. It was a disorganized outcry of vicious rage, and Eric was quick to react. “Stop,” he commanded, raising the sword again slightly and they quieted. “Never mind him. Tell me what it is you want with his farmlands.”

“*Stolen*. land! We *want*, it. back,” it was the big one that spoke. Each word was in a different voice, and its mouth didn’t seem to move.

“This farm has been in my family for generations,” I responded in my own defense. Truthfully I was trembling like a leaf. I forgot I even had a gun in the face of these things.

“Who gave it to your family?” Eric asked me now calmly.

Honestly, I didn’t really know. “No one, I mean, my grandfather settled it or bought it.”

“*Stole*. it,” the thing hissed.

Eric looked annoyed now, “Even if it is stolen. You cannot expect this man to pay for his family’s mistakes.”

“His, family. *dies*, we will. *stop*,” another of them spoke, and I could only tell it was a different one because it came from a new direction as they both used a combination of different voices.

“We. will *kill*, all. No matter. *where*,” the first agreed.

“You won’t kill *anything* if I kill you all instead,” Eric reminded them calmly. “Find a compromise.”

In response, they howled and screamed again. It was a resounding ‘no’. That made me nervous. I couldn’t see how Eric could defeat them all. Especially not if they decided to attack all at once.

“Enough!” he repeated, “You behave as if you’re not cursed. You’re corrupted by the very energy you sought to use. You’re lucky the land itself doesn’t reject you.”

An uncomfortable silence followed his words, and I took the opportunity to speak, “My family doesn’t live here anymore. If I leave, is that enough?”

“*No!*” the word reverberated through my chest. They hesitated for a long moment, before speaking to Eric in another language.

“They say your ancestors stole their tribe’s land. They don’t like you using it the way you are; they say their dead are buried beneath the corn fields,” Eric explained without emotion. “They want blood for blood.”

I could’ve been sick. As a young boy, I remembered collecting bones from the fields, it was a game of sorts that my father encouraged, and we would burn them all in large bonfires. We weren’t supposed to talk about it, but the crops always grew especially well in that area.

“The bones…” I murmured.

“Yes,” the creature responded bitterly.

“Will they accept me? Only me, and leave my family be?”

This seemed to give them pause. I believe they wanted to say no, that they would hunt my family for an eternity as retribution for the sins of my ancestors. “Yes,” the word came as a reluctant hiss. “*One*, is. ‘compromise’.”

However Eric answered for me. “No. You don't understand, Robert. You can’t. They don’t mean to kill you, exactly. They mean to turn you into one of them. It’s a cursed state between life and death.”

“It’s okay, Eric. I wasn’t any good to my family while they were here. If I can do this for them, so that these things won’t hunt them, it’s okay.”

“You **don’t** have to.”

“No, I don’t have to. But this farm is nothing but misery, and sometimes you just have to do the right thing.”

“How is dying the right thing?” he snapped.

“Because it will protect my family. Don’t you worry, boy. I want to make up for all the wrong I’ve done.”

“I can kill them all.”

“There are too many; you know that.”

“I can do it.”

“More. will, *come*,” the creatures said coldly, and Eric set his jaw irritated.

“Let me do this. Let me make peace and protect my family. Leave this place,” I pleaded with him; he was too young to understand why this was important.

“You’re giving up.”

“No, I’m choosing to make up for past sins,” I assured him softly.

“It’s ridiculous, you can’t-”

He stopped when I set a hand on his shoulder, “Don’t you worry about me; you’re a good man. You gave me a second chance, and this is the best thing I can do with it.”

“You’re a fool…” he murmured but made no further protest.

I moved past him slowly. “Take care of yourself. I’ll see you again someday.”

“I’ll hold them to their word.”

“I’m sure you will…”

I knew he would stay until it was over, but I wished he wouldn’t. It’s not healthy to see that kind of thing.

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Chapter 25
My Brother is Missing

Claire Walsh: November, 1998.

It’s been two weeks since my brother disappeared in the middle of the night. But I *know* he’s still alive because his friend, Eric, said so. Well, what he *actually* said was that Charles *wasn’t* in the apartment when it exploded- which is basically the same thing. I don’t know who took him, or why they torched his flat; I just know he’s out there. Somewhere. And if you try to tell me anything different, I won’t listen.

News travels fast in small towns, and I’ve lost count of how many people have bought me home-baked goods and clothes or offered a place to stay. Even our parents tried to contact me about him. I ignored their attempts though, because *fuck* them. They don’t get to do what they did and then show up all concerned like they care. *Anyway*. My point is that no one should want to hurt Charlie.

However, despite that, there are still people saying that he ‘disappeared himself’. He was involved in an accident with a civilian while off duty a few weeks back. Essentially, a teenage girl got shot, and Charles was suspended. So some think he set fire to his own place and ran away, but that’s just not true! Charlie wouldn’t do that! Or if he did, he wouldn’t do it without telling me!

At the moment, I’m staying at a hotel with Eric and Calla. Eric has been out searching for him every day, and sometimes he’s gone the entire night as well. So far, he’s found nothing. Meanwhile, Calla, Eric’s friend, has been tasked with babysitting me. She’s a bodyguard, or something like that. I don’t really know what she is exactly. Eric seems to think that whoever took Charles might also try to take me.

Because of this, I’m not supposed to leave the room. Now, I know they’re Charlie’s friends, and I know they *mean* well, but I feel like a prisoner. They’re both so cold. Neither of them have any feelings! Eric has hardly spoken, and he barely looks at me. While Calla is an ice queen; completely emotionless and strange in her own way. She only says anything when I speak directly to her, and she doesn’t eat unless I give her express

permission, although I'm starting to wonder if she's just like that. I'm horrible for saying this, but they don't behave like people. They're more like robots, or something, and they make me feel so alone.

I spent the first few days crying into cheap hotel linens. Now the tears have dried, and I have nothing left. Most of the time, I just lay curled up facing the wall, quietly listening to whatever show Calla found on the TV. She even watches the ads with interest - it's like she's never seen cable before. Anyway, this was exactly what I was doing when Eric returned. I didn't hear him come in, so I was surprised when someone sat on the bed beside me and placed a hand on my shoulder to get my attention.

"Claire-" Eric began.

"Did you find him?" I interrupted dully without turning to face him.

"…No," he murmured. I could hear in his voice that he was exhausted.

"Then *what?*" I muttered under my breath. I didn't mean to be so hostile; I was just tired and hurting.

He hesitated, pulling away, and I felt a twinge of guilt. "I haven't found him because I *can't* find him. Not without help. But the people I have to ask…" he trailed off.

"What about them?" I demanded, impatient.

"They're very dangerous, and I need Calla to take me there. You will have to stay here alone for a time."

"What? No!" I sat up abruptly, "If you're going somewhere, or if you know someone that can find him, then I'm coming with you."

"You don't understand. I wouldn't be doing this if I had any other option left. They might well kill me on sight, and if you come with us, the best you can hope for is the same fate."

That got to me. Something about the way he said it made me think he was a little scared of whoever it was, and I couldn't imagine that there were many things he was afraid of.

"I don't care. If they can find my brother, I'm coming with you." I repeated, trying to sound more confident than I was. There was no way I was going to let him leave me behind.

Eric sighed, and I got the impression he simply didn't want to put any more effort into arguing. "You're making a poor decision," he told me

bluntly. “We leave early tomorrow. Try to rest.”

He moved away from me to go to Calla, and I noticed when he did that he was relying heavily on his cane for the first time in days. He fell into place beside her clumsily, and they spoke softly to one another. I couldn’t quite make out what was said, but it seemed to be something about an institute?

***

I don’t remember falling asleep. I didn’t even mean to. So when I awoke the following morning to raised voices, I was immediately alarmed. My panic turned into confusion as I noticed Calla standing almost entirely naked in the middle of the room. She was only wearing a set of small lacy underwear, and her long hair just barely covered her chest.

“You *cannot* open the door to strangers like *that*!” Eric was insisting. He looked annoyed more than anything else, as he gathered up her clothes and tossed them in her general direction.

“I thought she was a servant,” the girl responded calmly.

“She was housekeeping, Calla. She is not going to bathe or dress you!”

“How should I know that?”

“Because this is not a castle-!” he stopped when he noticed I was awake, “This isn’t what it looks like.”

I put my hands up, “No judgment.”

“Claire, it really isn’t,” he insisted, exasperated.

“I’m just going to go to the other room so you two can sort this out…” I assured.

“Do you think this color is nice on me?” Calla asked casually, but I didn’t hear his response as I slipped into the bathroom.

When I returned, the situation seemed resolved. She was dressed again, and Eric wasn’t in the room. He returned a few minutes later with car keys in his hand. “Are you ready?” he asked me calmly.

“Yes,” I agreed without hesitation; it’s not like I had any packing to do.

Eric’s car was, to put it politely, ancient. A shiny black vehicle with white wall tires; its only saving grace was that the engine seemed to be

overhauled. Most of the drive went by in silence. Calla took the front seat beside Eric, and I got the back. Which was okay. At least I could lie down.

Also, for the record, *neither* of them are good drivers. They both drove so fast that I was afraid to look at the speed. Eric tended to take corners too fast, sending me sprawling across the back seat more than once, and Calla drove like a New York cab driver. She cut people off mercilessly left, right, and center. It wasn't surprising that car horns were constantly directed at us. Overall it was a terrible car trip. We only stopped twice for fuel, and not once did we get snacks.

However, as we traveled, something began to play on my mind. I thought the same car had been following us almost the entire way, not only following, but keeping pace. Initially, I believed I was mistaken. It was a red Ford Mustang, and I saw it in glimpses on different streets. That was, until we hit a straight stretch of road, and I watched it gain on us out the back window.

"Ahh, Eric…" I murmured, trying to draw his attention to the fact that we were being pursued.

"I know." He responded as if it didn't interest him at all.

At this point, Calla sat up straighter, then spoke aloud to someone not present in the car. "Yes," there was a moment's pause, then another, "Yes." It sounded like she was talking on the phone to someone, only she didn't have a phone. "No. Eric is driving."

"Who are you talking to?" I asked, curious, and was ignored entirely.

"Don't give him details," Eric muttered.

"He says he would like to race you."

"Not interested."

"Aww. You're no fun, little Orphan." The words came from Calla and were in her voice, but I could tell they weren't hers. The Mustang pulled ahead, almost sideswiping us on the way past. Naturally, I flipped that car the bird. I couldn't see the driver through the obnoxiously tinted windows, but I was sure he got the message.

"Try to keep up then. You only get five miles of grace." Her voice was soft, but again the words weren't hers.

"What does he mean by that?" Eric asked, irritated.

“My contract. I cannot be more than five miles from him.”

“Bastard,” Eric muttered, speeding up slightly in response as the red car was getting further ahead. Honestly, I didn’t fully understand what was happening. However, from that time onward, we followed the Mustang. Eric didn’t allow Calla to drive again, and he never let that car get far enough ahead that it was out of sight.

***

The next time we slowed, it was when we arrived at a black fence that stretched long and tall across the land. Wide gates swung open, and we approached what looked like a pile of rubble. The ruins of a building, I guessed. However, the air shimmered as we crossed a barrier of some kind, and I blinked several times, confused. In place of the rubble was a tall, dark castle, complete with high walls, banners, and guards.

Calla was the first to leave the car, and Eric followed shortly after her. He came to stand beside my door and leaned on the frame, blocking my line of sight with his body. “Claire. I need you to listen to me carefully now. Stay behind me. Never say that you ‘agreed to’ or with anything they say, no matter the context. If you are unsure. Say nothing.” He spoke in a low tone and then handed me two small earplugs. “Keep these on you. Put them in **immediately** if anyone speaks to you with anything *extra* sounding in their voice. Do you understand?”

I wanted to come up with some sort of witty comeback, but I couldn’t manage anything more than a meek, “Alright,” I hadn’t realized how nervous I was until that moment or how tense he was. I felt even worse when he stepped back as I saw what he had kept from my view. The wall was lined with people pointing drawn arrows directly at us. I almost couldn’t make myself get out of the car, and I debated staying there before I hurried to catch up to them.

Calla walked slightly ahead of Eric. She seemed perfectly comfortable, and even had a slight spring in her step. While Eric was more cautious, watching everything around with apprehension. Instinctively, I reached out to hold onto his arm. “Don’t,” he said firmly, brushing me off, “I need full movement if anything happens.”

“Sorry...” I whispered nervously. Calla seemed to notice and slowed her pace to fall into step with me.

“It’s okay. They won’t kill you the same way they’ll kill him. You won’t suffer,” she assured in the least reassuring way I’d ever heard.

“…*What?*” I squeaked.

“Also, make sure to kneel. They like that,” she added.

My imagination was running rampant as I tried to guess what these people were. Medieval gang members? Mafia? Monsters? I didn’t know. Calla led us through the township and into a courtyard. We were followed by guards the entire way. While people with bright eyes and pointed ears stopped what they were doing to watch us pass, as if *we* were the spectacle in this situation. When we reached the main building we entered into a wide hallway, and this was the point at which Eric stopped using his cane. I knew he was ready to pull the sword from it at any moment.

Behind us, the hall filled with armed guards. They were close enough now for me to see the embroidered detail on their armor, and they blocked our escape route. “Eric…” I said nervously.

“I know,” he responded sharply, and I shut my mouth.

We continued down the hall for only a short time before Calla stopped and gestured for Eric to go ahead of her. In front of us was a large set of carved wooden doors; they were wide open and inviting into the room beyond. The air coming from it smelt oddly sweet, like powdered sugar.

Eric hesitated, and although he still seemed perfectly calm, I wondered if this was difficult for him in a way I didn’t fully understand. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly before stepping through the threshold, completely devoid of emotion. I tried to follow his lead, and keep my expression blank, but I couldn’t help a little gasp of shock.

It was so much more inviting than I had expected it to be. The interior was massive with a high ceiling. A wall-length window, framed with heavy drapes that spilled onto the floor, allowed sunlight to stream in, and bookshelves took up the entire back wall. Beside the books was a secondary door. It was open, and I assumed it led into an additional study room or balcony.

Positioned near the bookshelf was a large mahogany desk with paperwork overflowing the edges. A young man sat there, absentmindedly

fiddling with the silver ring on his thumb as he wrote. He seemed oddly irritated when a breeze blew through the room between the two open doors, ruffling his work. “For the **last** time, *Markos.* If you don’t *shut* the *damn door* on your way out, I swear-” he stopped mid-sentence, dropping the pen in surprise as he looked up to see Eric.

They made eye contact, and both tensed. The man was barely older than Eric, maybe Charles’s age. His eyes were bright lime green, and his white hair was pushed messily to one side. “Markos,” the blonde demanded, his demeanor changing on a dime to be more intimidating.

“Oh, would you calm down? You have paperweights for a reason.” A voice answered from the other room before the second taller man stepped into view. He was rather handsome and older by some years. His hair was a pinkish white-blonde, and his eyes purple. He seemed distinctly pleased to see us. “Ma Petite Poupée, I knew you wouldn’t be far behind!”

“You knew of this and didn’t warn me prior?” the younger man demanded of him.

“Are you displeased, Nathaniel? You have no idea the lengths I took to make this possible! Although… The human girl is a bonus, and the boy wasn’t supposed to come in armed,” Markos said thoughtfully.“ ***Calla, make sure they don’t move .***”

When he spoke the last sentence, there was an almost musical undertone to his voice. That must have been what Eric meant by ‘extra sounding’, and Calla moved immediately. I didn’t even have the time to blink before the cold steel of a blade was at my throat. However, Eric moved just as quickly, so we were now in an awkward standoff. They both had swords pointed at each other, and Calla had an additional one to my throat.

“I’m *profoundly* displeased,” Nathaniel responded tensely.

“Oh? Should I not have brought them to your office? I can have them taken to the below chambers,” Markos offered pleasantly.

“No,” he answered, then addressed Eric, “Why are you here? Surely you weren’t fool enough to fall into a trap set by Markos.”

Eric smiled with slight cynicism, “I came because I need your help.”

This seemed to catch the man off guard, “Do explain.”

“Someone has gone missing. There are no energy signatures. I can’t find him on any map, or with any of my tracking abilities. He no longer exists, so to speak… But I know *you* could find him with your capability. So that is what I’m asking of you.”

“And this person, he’s ‘important’ to you?”

Eric looked annoyed now as if he didn’t want to answer but eventually did, “Yes.”

“How important?”

“I’m here aren’t I?”

“I suppose that’s a point. And what will you do for me in return for finding this person?”

“You can’t be considering this. I didn’t bring him here for you to bargain with.” Markos protested in a lower tone, but Nathaniel put a hand up to silence him.

“Nothing,” Eric answered calmly.

“You will give me ‘nothing’ in return for my favor?”

“There is nothing more I can give you. We both know that.”

He paused now as if considering, “There’s always *more* you could give.”

“I will give you **nothing**,” Eric repeated unwavering. “Help me only because I am asking you to.”

A tense silence followed his statement before Nathaniel spoke again, “An ‘*order,’* is it?” he sounded mildly bemused.

“It is.”

The man considered Eric’s proposal for a long moment before he gave up. “Markos, call off your pet,” he stated flatly, and the other man begrudgingly nodded. In response, Calla lowered her weapons, and I scrambled away from her, relieved.

“Is he going to help us?” I whispered nervously.

“I don’t know,” Eric told me honestly.

“I will, though only so I can be rid of you.”

“How kind of you.”

“Careful, Eric. You’re in my castle, and I don’t have that much patience.”

“Are you making a threat?”

“No. I’m requesting that you be polite.” It was clear the man was struggling to control his temper.

“I am being polite.”

Nathaniel sighed, deeply frustrated with the situation, as he rubbed his temples. “Markos, have everyone washed up and dressed for dinner. No harm is to come to them, accidental or otherwise, am I clear?”

“You are clear,” he responded coldly.

“We’re not eating here-” Eric protested quickly, speaking over him, but was quiet when Nathaniel gave him a firm look.

“Have the kitchen remove the meat from this evening’s meal,” he instructed.

“Very well,” Markos agreed bluntly, I got the distinct feeling he wasn’t happy with this arrangement. Regardless, he motioned for the guards to stand down, then offered his hand to Calla. She took it without hesitation and gave a small curtsy.

“Follow,” she instructed as Markos walked away with her. I can’t say I was eager to do so after having had her threaten to kill me, then Nathaniel spoke again.

“Eric, would you remain with me for a moment? I wish to speak with you in private,” he requested.

Eric’s demeanor faltered then as he was caught between apprehension and suspicion. He looked to me and then back to the man, calculating, “For no more than a moment, Nathaniel.”

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Chapter 26
Eric’s Friends are a Bit Scary

Claire Walsh: November, 1998.

I don’t know how long a moment is supposed to be, but I didn’t see Eric again until dinner. Markos led us out of the castle and down a narrow, snow-covered path through the gardens. We were headed toward what looked like a second smaller castle. It was bitterly cold out, all the plants were covered in ice, and I was beginning to shiver. However, as we approached our destination, I noticed that steam rose from the new building, and there was no snow on or around it. Rather, it radiated heat.

“ ***Make sure she is bathed*** . I will send robes for you, ma Poupée.” He used the same musical tone as he spoke to her and kissed the back of her hand before he turned to go, leaving us at the entrance.

“Come,” Calla instructed me as she pushed through the doors.

Inside I was surprised to see that it was a bathhouse. Mist swirled around heated inground pools, filling the air with a thick humidity, and several women approached us as soon as we entered. They were slim with flat chests and narrow hips, dressed in silky robes. I was so distracted by their slightly pointed ears that I didn’t realize what they were doing until they began to remove my clothes.

“H-hey, wait n-!” I stammered, confused, but the look of pure disgust on their faces wilted my protests.

“We don’t answer back. It’s their job to tend to us.” Calla explained as two women were undoing the braids in her hair. They detangled it gently with their fingers, then brushed it out as she stood patiently and allowed herself to be undressed. That didn’t make me any more confident, but I supposed it wasn’t my place to reject their traditions, so I followed her lead.

Unfortunately for me, Calla was trim and fit with not an ounce of fat on her, while I was very average. I tried to cover myself self-consciously, but my hair wasn’t long enough to cover anything, and I didn’t appreciate having my general body flab shown to everyone in the room. It was an extremely uncomfortable experience. My skin was stretchy and blotchy

with cellulite in my thighs; meanwhile, Calla looked like a muscular runway model.

I sank into the clean water gratefully. It was comfortably warm, and I relaxed for the first time in weeks as the women washed my hair. I was dimly aware that Calla was beside me, and the smell of roses filled the air.

“Do you do this every day?” I asked her curiously.

“Yes. Humans gather many smells throughout the day, so it is necessary.” She answered in a matter-of-fact monotone that made me wonder how she had survived the past two weeks on only low-pressure hotel showers.

“Can I ask you more questions?”

“If it would please you,” she responded calmly.

That gave me pause. Did she mean it? Or was she just answering to be polite? I decided on the former, “That man, Markos, is he your boyfriend?”

“No.”

That didn’t give me much to work with. “Husband?”

“No. I am his property,” she explained vaguely.

“You can’t own a person,” I laughed until I realized she was entirely serious, then I let it drop. “What about the man Eric spoke to? They seemed to know each other?”

“Yes, they know one another. Eric is Nathaniel’s property. Although he hasn’t been home in many years.”

I turned to face her then, ready to explain that what she was saying was inherently wrong. However, as I moved, one of the women pulled my hair, and I lost my train of thought. “Ow,” I complained, pouting.

“You are intended to remain still,” Calla informed me.

“Yeah, I got that,” I answered flatly, glaring at the woman ruefully before restarting our conversation. “If you’re both ‘property,’ how can Eric speak like that to him? Shouldn’t he be more ‘obedient’?”

“He cannot. But Eric is very disobedient; he causes himself much unnecessary pain in resisting them, and he has been sentenced to death for his sins.”

“They’re going to kill him?!” I asked, shocked. I know he said they might before, but I hoped he was exaggerating.

Calla seemed to give the question some consideration, “Perhaps. The responsibility is Nathaniel’s, and few others would carry out the sentence without his permission to do so.”

“Why doesn’t he just give others that permission then?”

“...I don’t know.”

The conversation lapsed into silence, and I was directed to leave the water shortly after. We were oiled, perfumed, and dressed. I was fitted into a blue-gray dress with a ruffled hem and annoyingly puffy shoulders. Then they set about working on our hair. Calla sat perfectly still like a doll throughout, but I found it rather disempowering to have no automation during the process.

After, we were escorted to the dining hall. Eric was already there when we entered, sitting in the furthest seat from Nathaniel. He seemed alright. His expression was calm, and his clothes were fresh while his hair was still damp. Calla left my side to sit with her ‘owner’, and I took the opportunity to survey the food. It was a lavish assortment of cheese, bread, and nuts alongside golden fruits that I had never seen before.

“Claire, is it? Would you sit beside me?” Nathaniel asked politely, noticing me meandering. I hesitated, and he spoke again, “ ***Come sit beside me*** .”

This time when I heard the words, my body moved involuntarily to fulfill his request. Automatically I tried to resist, but his will entirely suppressed my own, which was alarming. I was like a puppet on a string as I came to sit beside him. I cursed myself for not remembering the earplugs Eric gave me. However, thankfully, the effect wore off gradually, and only left a slightly sick feeling in my stomach.

“Nathaniel,” Eric warned tensely.

“Be reasonable, it was hardly a command. It was… More of a firm suggestion.”

“I asked you not to use them on her.”

“You also asked for my help, and for me not to use them on you. You can’t have *everything* your way,” he answered nonchalantly before

returning his attention to me. “However, I do apologize if that experience alarmed you.”

I didn’t know what to say, so instead, for perhaps the only time in my entire life, I just sat there quietly. Not that he seemed to mind as he reached across the table to make up a plate of food. When he was finished he placed it in front of me. “Please eat. I’m sure you must be hungry after such a long drive.”

He was right. I hadn’t fully realized how hungry I was until then. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Markos also made a plate for Calla, and I realized that was probably why she had always needed permission to eat.

Did they think we couldn’t put food on our own plates? I thought, annoyed. I was sure he was only doing it out of some misguided sense of chivalry. Like I was too little and feminine to know what I wanted, or whatever.

The food itself was extremely bland. There weren’t any condiments on the table, and what little flavor there was came from combining the different foods. The only exception to this was the fruit, which was, in contrast, excessively sweet. I could have eaten that all day.

“Is the food to your liking?” Nathaniel asked curiously, interrupting my daydreaming.

“Yes,” I lied quickly, not wanting to be offensive.

“Good,” he smiled superficially. “Now, Eric tells me that it’s your brother who is missing?”

“Yes, his name is Charles…” There was a stab of pain in my heart from just the mention of his name. I was here being bathed, and clothed, and fed, while he was goodness knows where, being treated any number of ways.

“And you are full-blood siblings?” he specified.

“As far as I know, yes? Why? Does that matter?”

“I will need a drop of your blood to find him, if you would allow,” he stated casually, holding out his hand for mine.

“What?” I asked, utterly dumbfounded.

“I can use your energy to find his. It’s a weak signature in humans, but blood shows it quite clearly,” he tried to explain.

“So… If you have a drop of my blood, you can find him?”

“Most probably.”

“And it’s just *one* drop?”

“Yes. It will hardly hurt.”

I wasn’t sure if I trusted that, but I would do whatever I could to find my brother. Cautiously allowed him to take my hand. His skin was startlingly cold, and I flinched away in surprise. That seemed to amuse him, for he chuckled softly. “Sorry,” he apologized without sincerity.

Nathaniel held my wrist so that the underside faced up, “Cup your hand as if you’re trying to hold water.” He instructed as he took a knife off the table. I tried to pull away then as a swell of panic coursed through me; there was no way that blade was clean enough for this. But his grip was too strong for me to break, and he didn’t even need to readjust for all my struggling.

He placed the tip of the blade into the center of my palm and twisted it in his fingertips. The knife must have been sharp because he didn’t apply any pressure, and the pain was delayed momentarily as blood welled up from the cut. Then it hit, an acute soreness that radiated out from the source. I had cut my foot stepping on glass before, and the sensation was much the same.

“Fuck!” I swore, squirming uncomfortably in my seat.

He ignored me, setting the knife down in exchange for a small vile, which he pulled from his pocket.“ ***Tilt your hand*** ,” he ordered, and I found that it did all on its own. The pooled blood trickled into the container without spilling. It was probably lucky he had used his power on me that time because I don’t think I could have done as he said with any accuracy otherwise.

When it was over, he closed the vile. “That was more than a single drop,” I muttered unpleasantly.

“Would it have been better or worse if it were?”

He had a point, but I didn’t want to give him that, “Can you let go of me now?” I countered.

“Mmm~” the man deliberated instead of answering as he looked over the wound. I didn’t like how he was studying it, and after a short moment, his gaze fixed on something across the table.

“Don’t,” Eric warned in a low tone, his chair scraped against the floor as he got up.

“You’re the one who chose to sit so far away,” the man responded, bemused. He brought the palm of my hand to his lips and licked the blood out of it. All the hair on my body stood on end, it didn’t hurt, but it felt *awful*. He let go of me when Eric reached us, and I nearly fell back off the chair.

Luckily Eric steadied me and examined the wound with scrutiny before letting go with a small sound of irritation. “That was unnecessary,” he muttered.

“I disagree. It was quite entertaining; what did you think I was going to do?”

“...Doesn’t matter. But don’t do anything like that again. I’m not here to play stupid games with you.”

“Remind me why you’re here again?”

Eric clenched his jaw before reluctantly answering. “Because I need your help.”

“‘Right. Remember that the next time you decide to be rude.”

“How was *I* being rude?”

“By assuming the worst of me.”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t?”

“I just gave you one.”

I didn’t understand what they were talking about until I dared look at my hand. It was healed, or at least closed over.

“That’s not how you earn trust, Nathaniel.”

“I helped her. I don’t see the problem.”

“You’re impossible,” Eric stated, dejected.

Did they always fight like this? I realized two things at once then. First, Eric was expecting something worse, and he was almost willing to let it happen. Secondly, I now understood what these people were. Cold to the touch and with a thirst for blood?

Vampires.

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Chapter 27
I Slept with a Monster

Claire Walsh: November - December, 1998.

Days passed since they took my blood, and every one of those days was the same. I was given a guest room across the hall from Eric. It was plush. Fancy bed, big window- and it made me mad. I didn’t want to be staying in a luxury palace while my brother was still missing. At some ungodly hour well before sunrise, one of *them* would walk into my room and begin cleaning. It was usually a woman, but twice it was a man, and neither cared at *all* that I was sleeping. Their interruption was, apparently, my wake-up call, and the cue that I was to go to the bathhouse to be prepared for the day. If I didn't, Calla would come to get me.

Then we were bathed, dressed, hair brushed, and expected at breakfast. There were only meals at dawn and dusk. If you missed one, you weren’t permitted any food in between. Guards followed us closely at all times, which allowed for no freedom. Eric had daily meetings with Nathaniel, and during that time I mostly stayed with Calla, since I wasn’t allowed to go anywhere without one of them. They spent their spare time sparring with one another in the gardens while I watched, becoming increasingly more restless by the second. I swear I was the only one who even still cared about Charles!

It was as I sat on the bench beneath a tree with purple flowers watching them fight, that Markos came to stand beside me. “Dreadfully boring, isn’t it?” he commented.

I looked up at him, surprised. He was wearing a well-fitting tailcoat over a semi-unbuttoned shirt and a laced-up vest. “Watching them practice the same things over and over, I mean. I usually take a walk. Would you care to join me?” he offered with a warm smile. The way he spoke was comfortable, and while I knew he wasn’t human, he still felt kind of like a normal person.

“Sure,” I grumbled. I wasn’t sure if going for a walk with a monster was a good choice, but I couldn’t sit still anymore.

He led me through parts of the gardens I hadn’t seen and toured me around the castle grounds. Along the way he made pleasant small talk. Commenting on certain architectural features and pointing out where all the different buildings were while occasionally giving trivia highlights. Initially, I was only half listening, but gradually he won me over.

“This castle has been the property of Nathaniel’s family for a long time. Believe it or not, it used to function as an insane asylum,” he said casually.

“Really?” I asked, astounded, “I would never have guessed that.” Nothing about it seemed like it would be suited, aside from, I suppose, its general isolation.

“Most wouldn’t,” he assured. We had come to a stop on a high balcony that overlooked the rest of the castle’s township, and he leaned forward casually on the railing as he continued. “When Nathaniel claimed the castle he made several fundamental changes, and that was something he abolished right away.”

“Wait, I thought you said the castle was his family’s anyway. Why did he need to ‘claim it’ if it already belonged to them?” I queried, narrowing my eyes as I came to stand beside him.

“It does belong to them. It’s just that there’s a small dispute right now over who exactly it belongs to. Nothing you should concern yourself with... However, I do wish that Nathaniel would take the matter seriously,” he explained with a sigh, and I couldn’t help myself.

“What do you mean?” I asked more curiously now.

He hesitated then as if unsure whether he should continue before he at last spoke. “Nathaniel is very confident that he will be able to maintain hold on this castle… But I am not so sure. He cares little for fighting and refuses all talks of peace. He has established connections with former enemies and disrespects his family name without caution. I’m not certain that he even remembers our original goal… It’s as if he doesn’t care at all.”

I was dumbstruck, I understood exactly how he felt. “I know what you mean. We came here for help, but it’s been days, and Eric hasn’t done anything. It’s like he doesn’t remember why we’re here or care about my brother anymore…”

“…I’m afraid I must ask for your forgiveness. Here I am talking of my problems, while I had entirely forgotten yours,” He said sympathetically. “I

don’t have any siblings myself, but I consider Nathaniel to be like a brother. If he were to go missing, I don’t know what I would do.”

“I just want him back…” I whispered quietly.

“It’ll be alright…” he assured, “Though I was surprised. I believed I was the one who brought Eric back; I thought he might be useful… I didn’t realize he had an ulterior motive. Sometimes I wonder if he was simply willing to use any excuse to get back into the castle…”

“Why would he need an excuse to come back here?”

“Oh? Did he not tell you? He used to live here, until he was exiled for his disobedience. He’s been trying to get back for many years.”

“He has?”

“Oh yes. I have known Eric for a long time. He’s an excellent liar, but he desires power above all else. I fear he might try to control Nathaniel.”

I could taste bitterness in the back of my throat as I considered what he said. It made a lot of sense to me. It had been days, and Eric wasn’t in any rush now to find my brother. He had never shown any emotion over it, not a single shred of caring. What if all he wanted was a good excuse to get back to this place, and ‘finding my brother’ was what he came up with?

“I don’t mean to upset you; I’m sure I’m mistaken,” Markos interrupted my speculations, sounding apologetic.

“It’s fine… Thank you for telling me,” I said quietly. I didn’t want to cry in front of him, but I could feel tears welling up and rolling down my cheeks. Everything was so much clearer now.

“Of course. I thought you had the right to know. Should you ever need anything, you can always come to me,” he said softly as he gently brushed a tear from my cheek with his thumb. His touch was cold, but I didn’t mind, “Though, it’s probably best you don’t mention to him that you’ve spoken with me. He has a temper, and you’ve seen the power he has over Nathaniel… I would hate to be reprimanded for this.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I assured him. Of all the people around, it was a monster who behaved the most human.

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After that, I met with Markos daily while Eric sparred with Calla. He was so friendly and honest about everything! He never hid what he was and answered every question I had. I thought that would be scary, but the way he spoke was so genuine that it was reassuring. I never felt like I was in any danger with him. In fact, I felt safer with him than I did with Eric.

He walked backward ahead of me so that he was facing me, and his expression was light. Caught somewhere between amusement and happiness, as he seemed to enjoy my company. He was a nice break from all the misery. Outdoors his eyes were less purple in the daylight, more a light silver, and he laughed light-heartedly when I asked if it was ‘safe’ for him to be out in the sunlight.

“Where did you grow up?” I began my interrogation as I recovered from the embarrassment.

“France,” he answered without hesitation.

“Huh. And why did you come here?”

“My family moved when I was very young.”

“Why?”

“We got chased out of town,” he smiled amused.

“What?! Why?”

“Monster problems,” he teased, pushing the hair back out of his face when the breeze blew it back on him.

“Wait, how old are you exactly?” Looking at him, I couldn’t tell, I guessed thirty, but it was hard to say.

“Hmm~ *Exactly?* Two hundred and ninety-nine. Perhaps this time, I will *finally* get a letter from the Queen,” he joked, and I couldn’t help but laugh. I never expected that. He told me about so many other things as well. What it was like growing up in the 1800s, how he watched the turn of humanity happen almost ‘overnight’, and how his family raised him in a very simple lifestyle.

By the time another week had passed, I was looking forward to our post-breakfast talks. Calla and Eric went about their routines as usual, and I waited for Markos. However, when he didn’t come to find me, I was quietly disappointed. I didn’t see him for the remainder of the day and neither he, nor Nathaniel, were at dinner.

“They’re not coming tonight,” Calla told me when she noticed I was looking for him. One of the marks on her face was different today. The silver crescent had a sun around it, with lines that stretched out across her cheek.

“I wasn’t- I-I mean… Why?” I stammered, embarrassed, and a little guilty as I looked away from her.

“They are busy. There was activity on the border that they needed to attend,” she explained.

“Activity?” I asked curiously, but Eric interrupted.

“Whatever it is, it’s not our concern,” he spoke without even bothering to look up.

“I’m not *concerned*… I’m just curious.”

“Don’t be. Stay away from Markos if you can help it.”

“Excuse me? Who are you to tell me who I should, or shouldn’t, be around?” I demanded, immediately annoyed.

“I know you go on a walk with him each day, but you shouldn’t trust him, or anything he tells you.”

“Because *you’re* so trustworthy yourself,” I muttered quietly under my breath. It mustn’t have been as quiet as I thought because when he spoke again, he lifted his gaze to stare directly at me.

“If you have something to say to me, Claire, say it.” He stated bluntly, and my ears heated with embarrassment.

“Fine,” I muttered in return, slamming my utensils down ready for a fight. “Are you even still looking for Charles?”

“Of *course* I am,” he responded tensely.

“Really? Because it doesn’t seem like it! It’s so obvious you used to live here. Everyone knows you, and you spend all your time in the gardens fighting Calla or talking to that Nathaniel guy in his office. When *exactly* are you looking for Charles? My blood was taken days ago, so why is it taking so long?!” I could hear my voice raising with each sentence. But he didn’t say anything when I stopped to catch my breath, so I continued.

“My brother could be *anywhere*. He could be *hurting*, or cold, or hungry, and we’re here in this *ugly* castle ‘*taking baths’* and eating ‘*magical fruit’*! I don’t want to stay in this vampire’s den anymore!” Eric **still** showed no

trace of human emotion, despite my yelling, and that truly set me off. I could feel tears stinging my eyes, but I was used to these kinds of fights with my parents, so I didn't let that stop me.

"You're worse than they are! You don't care about anything! For whatever kind of creature he is, at least Markos *talks* to me. He *listens,* and he *sympathizes*. He tries to help, and he at least *cares*! While you- You do nothing. You couldn't find him before, and you can't find him now. I don't think you're even trying! You just wanted to get back to this stupid castle! Even now, you just sit there, cold, and emotionless." I lowered my tone of voice as undiluted rage burned through me. "You don't act like a person because you're not one. You're subhuman. I wish *you* were the one who was taken instead of Charles!"

I stopped there, I had run out of breath to go on, and he still seemed entirely unfazed. It was useless. There was nothing in him that could even understand what I was saying; he was incapable. I glared at him as I regained myself, and after a moment, he grabbed his cane and stood up slowly.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he stated, devoid of emotion as he moved to exit the room, leaving his food unfinished. When he left, the guards followed him, and I realized then that they hadn't been following *us* all these days. They were following *him*. I was about to shout obscenities after him when Calla spoke up.

"Shut your mouth," she uttered in a low tone catching me by surprise. "If you ever speak to him like that again, I'll slit your throat."

Her voice was unsettlingly calm as she made the threat, and no emotion crossed her face. However, when I met her gaze, I felt pure, cold fear. Something sinister resided deep in her eyes, and I could feel the malice leaking out. Like a thread pulled taught, ready to snap at any moment.

"You don't know what it costs him to be here, and if you want to talk about uselessness, let's not forget that you've done nothing but cry for the past weeks. The only useful thing you could have done was die."

"What do you mean the only useful thing I could do is die?" I flinched slightly.

"Didn't you wonder *why* it's taking so long to find him? Did you honestly think that those few drops of blood would be enough? Or easy to

work with? Ordinarily, the spell requires the entire volume of your body."

"So why not just kill me then!"

"Because you are Charles's little sister, and Eric wouldn't allow it. He said Charles would never forgive him if he sacrificed you to find him, and he spends the time he does with Nathaniel trying to rewrite the spell to work with so little," she responded coldly. "You're a stupid little girl. You would never have survived what he and I did. How he, or Markos, tolerate you is beyond me."

She turned back to her food as if she hadn't spoken. Her expression was still neutral as she reached over the table to steal a square of cheese off Eric's abandoned plate while I sat frozen, trying to process the shock. I didn't feel like eating anymore. Anger simmered in my gut. I got up from the table abruptly and stormed off, though she ignored me entirely.

I made my way back to my room, and no one followed me. I guess I wasn't considered dangerous, so they didn't care what I did. It was Eric's rule that I was supposed to stay with him or Calla, and I didn't much care to obey it at that point. I had a better idea. I went to the bathhouse and prayed that it was the right place to go for what I needed.

I hadn't been there by myself before, and when I entered alone the women looked confused. "I need lingerie," I stated confidently, only to be met with blank stares.

"We have received no instruction to bathe you," one of them answered calmly.

"It's a new order. My master sent me; I need to be washed and dressed in something sexy," I lied quickly. They still seemed mildly confused by my request but did move to fulfill it. Of course, I had no say in what I got. I was dressed in lacy purple underwear with a semi-translucent robe over the top, and they sent me away with only a long coat to cover everything.

I lightly tiptoed back, trying not to step in any snow too deep as my slippers did little to protect me from the cold, and made my way to Markos's room. He had pointed it out to me once before on one of the tours, but I hadn't seen inside it. So I was relieved to find the door unlocked and slipped into the room.

The interior was what one would expect for a castle. A spacious room illuminated by candlelight with a balcony and a canopy bed in the middle.

In one corner was a desk and bookshelf, while the rest of the walls were decorated with glistening ornaments and paintings. I had half been expecting that he would already be there, so when he wasn't, I was at a loss for what to do. This was probably the most effort I had ever put into a hook-up, most guys are just happy for you to show up, but I thought I might need to convince him given the circumstances.

I waited for about an hour before I began to have regrets. Maybe this wasn't a good idea? To calm my anxieties, I decided to step out onto the balcony. It was high up, overlooking most of the castle, and I could see all the way down to the courtyard with the moonlight reflecting off the snow.

Eric was down there, his dark hair and clothes standing out against the lighter surroundings. He seemed to be waiting for something, but I wasn't sure what until I noticed some people entering through the gates. I didn't recognize any of them, and they seemed to be in armor returning from somewhere.

Shortly after, I spotted Nathaniel and Markos returning to the castle as well. They both had a strange glow around them that sent blue sparks high into the air. I blinked, assuming my eyes were playing tricks on me; it almost looked like they had wings before the energy died down. I watched as Eric approached Nathaniel, and Markos subtly circumvented to avoid him.

I realized then that he would probably come up to his room any time now, and I hurried back inside. Nervously, I adjusted my position on the bed several times, trying to work out the best pose to be in for when he arrived. But panicked in earnest when I heard footsteps coming down the hall, and hastily pulled the overcoat back on.

When he opened the door, I was standing at the end of his bed with the coat wrapped tight around me. He looked momentarily alarmed to see someone in his room before he determined that it was me. Then his expression changed, and he seemed slightly suspicious. "Claire, what are you doing here?" he asked with a tight smile.

Instead of explaining myself, I slowly opened the coat to reveal what little I was wearing beneath it. I allowed it to slip from my shoulders and carefully stepped out of the pile of fabric toward him. The floor was cold under my bare feet, and he froze in place watching me. His expression was

one of complete surprise as I approached, and he hesitated as he processed my intentions.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked finally.

“Very,” I assured, wrapping my arms around his neck, and pressing my body against him as our lips met.

He returned the kiss with a level of uncertainty, and in response, I kissed him more fiercely. For some reason, I worried he might turn me away, which made me feel anxious. I had never been turned down before. Cautiously I began to undo the buttons of his shirt; I was waiting for him to stop me, but he didn’t.

“Someone’s eager,” he teased as he *finally* began to help me. Naturally, I didn’t justify his remark with a response as I pushed off his clothes; there were way too many layers. However, beneath them, his body was muscular. He’s by no means a small man, and his shoulders were flawless.

I took a minute to admire his figure, tracing my fingertips over his muscles. He was way out of my league. His skin was perfect; smooth and soft, if not slightly cooler than a normal person would be. There was a small scar on the left side of his abdomen. But he subtly stopped before I could touch it, redirecting my attention into another kiss that left me breathless.

“Are you okay?” he asked, clearly amused, as he pushed the hair back from my face.

“I’m *very* okay.”

He smiled, “Good~” it was oddly sweet of him to check in like that; I hadn’t assumed he would be the type to care. I could feel he was being controlled in his actions, and I briefly wondered why. But I lost all concern when he picked me up and carried me to the bed. The last of our clothes came off as I lay among the sheets, and before long we were intertwined.

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When morning came, he was gone, and I made the walk of shame back to my own room as quickly as I could. Hoping all the while that Calla wouldn’t already be there. By my good fortune, I got back before the cleaning person arrived, and I was able to get to the bathhouse before anyone noticed.

I sat in the warm water getting washed and felt oddly guilty when I saw Calla. Sure, she had threatened to kill me. But was sleeping with her boyfriend/not-boyfriend type person for revenge *really* the best choice I could have made? *Probably not*. By the time breakfast came around, I was convinced everyone knew. Though no one said anything, and Markos behaved as he always did.

The scratches I left on the back of his neck were slightly visible above the collar of his shirt, and I turned bright red. Normally I would have been proud of my work, but in this case, I hoped no one else would notice them. Thankfully, he made no mention of the night before, and I avoided making eye contact with him.

“Where are Eric and Nathaniel?” I asked after enough time passed that I realized they weren't coming to breakfast.

“Arguing,” Markos answered me casually.

“Arguing?”

“The spell is complete enough to show your brother's location. But not enough to know what you’d be walking into. Eric wants to leave; Nathaniel wants him to wait,” he explained further, sounding rather bored by it.

“What do you mean not enough to know what we’d be walking into?”

“We can’t tell whether he’s alive or dead, alone or with others, who or what took him-” He continued talking, but I didn’t hear the rest as I all but ran out of the room to find Eric.

It wasn’t hard to locate them; I could hear Eric’s voice from down the hall before I even approached the office.

“For the last time, I don’t give a damn! I don’t need to know anything else. I just need to know **where** he is! I can handle the rest.”

“Please be reasonable. This could be something worse; it could be my brother- you don’t understand how much he wants you dead.” Nathaniel was insisting, he almost sounded pained.

“I *don’t* care, Nathaniel. Just tell me where my friend is!”

“Must you always be in such a rush to run off to your death?!”

This time there was a tense silence, and I entered the room to see Nathaniel standing facing the bookshelf. He looked wordlessly frustrated with one hand to his temple while Eric sat with his arms folded in the chair

in front of the desk. The tension between them electrified the air uncomfortably as neither seemed willing to give an inch toward compromise.

“You came back just to torture me, didn’t you?” Nathaniel murmured softly under his breath.

“Is it working?” Eric responded with malice.

“More than you know,” he muttered more quietly to himself.

“So tell me where Charles is, and I’ll be gone.”

“Fine,” Nathaniel agreed at last in a passive-aggressive tone, not that Eric cared.

He turned abruptly and noticed me for the first time. From the look of mild shock on his face, I guessed he wasn’t expecting me to be there, and he hesitated. Which in turn caused Eric to look over as well. The three of us stood in awkward silence before Nathaniel recovered enough to continue what he was doing.

On the desk was a piece of parchment with faint brown markings. The marks were still forming and slowly growing darker to create what looked to be a map. I wondered if the brown substance was my blood, but decided not to ask, as Nathaniel took a blade to the paper. He sliced it with purposeful precision, and a silvery-blue energy came off it like dust along the cut line while the uncut half continued to develop.

“Don’t call me if you need help,” Nathaniel stated venomously, offering the piece he had removed to Eric.

“I won’t,” Eric snapped back, snatching the paper from him as he stood. “Claire, we’re leaving right now.”

For a second, I considered protesting. I wanted to say goodbye to Markos, but it quickly became apparent that Eric wasn’t messing around. We left the office, and he led me directly to the garage without saying another word. I had expected that we would take Eric’s black car. However, he grabbed a different set of keys off the hook and moved straight to the red Mustang.

“Get in,” he told me firmly, and I hesitated.

“Are we allowed to take that one..? Shouldn’t we take yours?”

“None of them are mine. I stole the black one last time. This time, I’m stealing the red one, it’s faster, and I think it’s Markos’s.” There was mischief in his eyes when he said that, and I dared not argue. I just hoped Markos wouldn’t mind too much.

If I thought Eric’s driving was terrifying before, that was nothing compared to this time. He floored it through the narrow streets of the castle, scraping the paint off the sides of the car at some points, and if the gates hadn’t opened for us, I’m sure he would have driven straight through them. He placed the paper on the dash; it was so faint I could hardly see the markings. However, he focused unblinkingly forward, and I knew we were going to get my brother. Finally.

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Chapter 28
Witch’s Possession Ritual? 0/10 Experience

Charles Walsh: December, 1998.

My eyes snapped open as the sensation of falling electrified my nervous system, and I met the ground all too quickly shortly after that. It was hard and cold - cement, I realized with confusion. I was glad I hadn’t landed on my broken arm; I wasn’t sure the plaster would have held up if I had.

I couldn’t quite comprehend where I was or how I had gotten there. When I went to bed, everything was largely under control. My little sister, Claire, was in the guest room, and Eric was asleep on the couch in the living room.

Now it was early morning, and I was somewhere entirely different from my house, wearing only pajama pants. I scrambled quickly to get up and orientate myself. It was freezing, my breath steamed the air, and I was shivering. Around me was the incomplete interior of a mall. I was standing on the ground floor and there were at least two floors above.

Construction materials lay abandoned all around. Scaffolding was still in place around the upper levels, loose wires hung down exposed, and it looked like parts of the building had collapsed at some point, leaving reinforced steel bars poking out of the broken concrete. It was dusty, and little bits of debris coated the floor.

A few years back, before I was an officer, some big developer had decided to build a mall in our town. But the project itself had been plagued with accidents. Workers were injured, machinery inexplicably broke down, and ultimately someone died. I hadn’t personally seen it before. I only knew about it because my boss, Sheriff Barrett, had been involved with the investigation and told me about it once.

He had been pretty vague on the details and never gave me the exact location of where it was, but I guessed this must be it. I stepped back to get a better view of the second level and cut my bare foot on some small shards

of glass that I had failed to notice. “Ouch,” I muttered to myself as I plucked the glass out.

In response, a soft chuckle echoed through the building and a chill ran down my spine as I realized I wasn’t alone. “Who’s there?” I called using my authority voice.

I was not prepared emotionally or physically for this. It was an unnerving situation, and I was trying to appear unalarmed, but I still hadn’t even pieced together how I had gotten there. Part of me hoped I was still dreaming, but maybe that was a bit optimistic. Every other time I’d faced circumstances like this, Eric had been there to resolve the issue. I wished he was here now.

What would he do in this situation? I thought, as I surveyed the area more carefully. I couldn’t see anyone initially, then I noticed a shadowy figure with reflective yellow eyes staring at me from the darkened hallway across the room. Out of reflex my hand moved to my side, reaching for the gun I didn’t have. “I don’t want any trouble,” I called.

“No one cares what you want,” the voice that answered was a young man. His accent was one I recognized; American, but not quite. It was similar to that of an immigrant from Europe in just the same way as Eric’s accent. I had never heard anyone besides him with that accent before, and I felt relieved. It must be someone he knows, I reasoned.

“My name is Charles. I’m one of Eric’s friends. I don’t know how I got here. Can you help me?” I asked, hopeful.

“I know who you are,” he answered, amused, as he stepped forward into the light. He was younger than I expected, a late teenager, or maybe early twenties? Reasonably tall, he looked like a punk, with his hair bleached white and dyed with subtle blue undertones. Meanwhile, his eyes were luminescent yellow.

“And I know who you’re associated with; that’s why you’re here,” he continued with a smile showing his teeth. That was more than a little unsettling, his canines were particularly prominent, and I knew I had been threatened. I was mistaken; this wasn’t a friend.

“Right. I think I’ll just go then,” I commented, already looking for an exit.

“No,” he said simply, pulling a switchblade from his pocket. This was going downhill fast. I had training for this kind of circumstance, but I was doubtful I would come out on top if this got physical.

“There’s no need for this to get violent,” I spoke calmly, trying to de-escalate the situation, and gingerly stepped back as he approached. I didn’t want to tread on any more glass.

“Oh, there’s plenty of reason for this to get violent,” he purred. It could have been a trick of the light, but his eyes lit up as he spoke, the yellow converting to electric blue.

He rushed at me, and my heart thundered against my ribcage. Eric had been teaching me a few things, and because of this, I knew how to disarm him. But I had never *actually* put it into practice when it counted. Nonetheless, I tried to match his speed. I blocked the front of his wrist with my right hand and smacked the back of his fist with the cast on my arm, causing the knife to fly from his grip. It slid cleanly across the floor well out of reach.

Honestly, I’m not sure which of us was more astonished that it worked, but I knew I needed to move quickly to strike again. So, as he readjusted to outmaneuver me, I lined up a punch with my good arm. My fist connected well with his jaw, and he stumbled, looking mildly surprised that he had been hit, then more annoyed.

“ ***Stop. You putrid sack of meat*** ,” he hissed. There was a strange undertone to his voice, and my body involuntarily followed his order.

After a moment, the effect wore off, and I stumbled back from the shock of it. Losing my balance completely when I stepped on another piece of debris. I hit the floor hard, and he was quick to take advantage. Before I could get up, he kicked me in the stomach. It knocked the breath out of me, and I curled over in pain. His expression then was amused but he didn’t move to hit me again. Instead, he held up his hand, and I was thrown across the room with a simple flick of his wrist. I slid across the ground helplessly and hit the nearest wall with considerable force.

I groaned in pain. My bare skin had scraped on bits of dirt and shrapnel the whole way, leaving a graze down my side that stung. I recovered slowly and realized I had landed near the switchblade. I reached for it right away,

and as soon as it was in my grasp, I pushed myself up and braced for the next attack.

“How cute. ***Stab yourself in the leg.***” He commanded, and I launched the knife toward my leg without hesitation, burying it deep into my thigh as I gasped in pain.

“Wonderful! ***Now, take it out, and throw it away.***” He stated casually, and again my hand automatically followed the instruction. It ripped the blade from my leg and tossed it aside. I didn’t understand how he was doing that, but as blood spurted from the resulting hole, my new concern became not bleeding out. I put as much pressure on it as I could stand, taking my eyes off the guy for only a moment as I did.

When I next remembered him, it was because we were face-to-face. He grabbed my throat in a chokehold and pushed me back hard into the wall. The force of it surprised me; he didn’t look like he should be as strong as he was. While keeping one hand over the injury in my leg, I used the other to try and loosen his grip. But it was pointless, he was too strong.

He looked like he was having fun as he took hold of my broken arm and crushed the cast in his hand. This was nothing more than a game to him. The plaster broke and crumbled away, and he seized my newly exposed wrist. He twisted it until the fractured bone cracked anew, and I swore in agony as a cheshire grin spread across his face.

“Are you starting to understand how this is going to work now?” he mused.

“Sorry, I’m not the quickest on the uptake,” I muttered through a clenched jaw. It probably wasn’t the best time to be snarky, but I couldn’t help myself. I thought I had a good idea of just how much he was going to hurt me by now, and I figured I couldn’t make it any worse.

“Let me spell it out for you then, I have a score to settle, and *you* are my volunteer.” He responded, amused as he pulled my arm toward his mouth. I didn’t fully understand what he was doing until his teeth sank into the flesh of my upper forearm. They cut like knives through the muscle, and he shook his head like a shark biting a seal. Violently tearing flesh from the bone.

My blood coated his lips and dribbled down his chin as he chewed the piece without remorse. I didn’t want to look at the wound; it didn’t hurt yet.

The shock of it was still protecting me, I presume. Nonetheless, when I finally dared look at it, a good chunk of muscle was missing. The flesh was initially entirely white, then beads of blood began to spot up as I watched each individual little vessel begin to bleed.

My head was spinning; I was going to faint. However, as he moved to take another bite, a new voice spoke. “Radomir, that’s enough.”

It seemed to catch us both by surprise, for the boy momentarily paused in the attack, and hesitantly looked over to see whoever had spoken. “I’m just having some fun,” he mumbled, deflated.

“Humans are fragile. You could kill him by mistake.” When I plucked up the courage to look over to who had spoken, I saw a second man. The upper half of his face was covered by a mask that resembled a skull. It obscured his identity in a strange way. It was as if my mind simply couldn’t process any of his features except his eyes, which were a dusky purple.

“I’m being gentle,” Radomir complained - I can assure you, he was not.

“No, you’re behaving like a reckless child. I won’t have you mess this up a second time. Let him go.” The man scolded, then came to stand beside me and placed a hand over the wound in my leg. An ice-cold sensation burned at the site of the cut, and it closed over. I flinched when he looked at the bite on my arm, not that he cared. Blue sparks emitted from his fingertips as he stemmed the bleeding without healing the wound entirely, “I do apologize for the incompetence you’ve experienced.”

I didn’t know whether I should answer him. I recognized the energy he wielded. It looked similar to what I had seen Eric use just once or twice before, and his accent was identical. I wondered if they were all the same kind of creature. When I didn’t answer him, he spoke again.

“ ***Come with me*** .” He utilized the same strange tone Radomir had, and the compulsion to do as he asked wash over me. I was led away away into a smaller room; I guessed it was intended to be a shop when complete. However, the only thing in it was a single metal chair bolted to the floor.

“ ***Sit. And don’t resist*** .” He commanded, and I did so gratefully. My feet were bleeding from walking over the rubble; I had no choice in where I stepped while under his previous instruction. Regardless, it was the next order directed at Radomir that made me panic.

“Tie him. Tightly. No mistakes.”

The boy moved to do as he was told, despite looking rather unhappy about it. He tied my ankles first to the chair legs, then my chest to the chair back, and finally, tied my arms behind the chair. He wrapped them from elbow to wrist and attached the remaining length of cord to a bolt on the floor somewhere behind me so that I couldn't pull free.

When he was done, the man inspected his work, "Good. Keep an eye on him, and don't interact unless he looks like he's going to escape. I'm going to go get the Witch." The bindings were painfully tight, and I'm not that flexible. So the way it twisted my shoulders only added to the discomfort.

"I had a witch…" Radomir grumbled.

"No. You gave a spell book to a teenage human girl and hoped for the best."

"It nearly worked."

"No, it didn't." The man sighed, exasperated, as he moved to leave. "Don't fuck up. Call me if anything happens."

Radomir didn't answer him that time. Instead, he glared at me as if it was *my* fault *he* was in trouble, before following the man out of the room.

As soon as I was alone, I tried to break free. I don't know how many different ways I attempted, but they all failed. It was useless. The bolts were well fastened to the ground, and the cord I was tied with was a steel cable. It cut into the wound on my arm when I struggled, causing it to slowly ooze blood which dripped and coagulated in a puddle on the floor. I shouted for help at the top of my lungs, but no one answered. Eventually, I wore myself out, and time dragged on.

It was too cold and uncomfortable to sleep. Every time I nodded off, my chin hit my chest and I woke. No one ever mentions how your legs start to ache when you can't stretch them or the crick in your neck you get after just a few hours of being tied up. It's like being trapped on an airplane with no legroom and psychopathic flight attendants, only a bit worse.

Radomir came back, eventually. He allowed me water, and to use the restroom, then he left again. He did this only once a day, and that was the only interaction I had. I wasn't sure if that was better or worse than being alone in the room for hours. At night it got colder, and I shivered so forcefully that my teeth chattered. Fatigue began to set in. That made it

difficult to keep my thoughts in order, and I found myself becoming increasingly unstable.

Days passed this way, then the man with the purple eyes returned. It was day five, I think, and when he entered the room darkened as something *else* followed him in. I could feel its presence in the air. It swirled like blackened ashes in the room, never resting, and spoke like a whisper on the breeze. *'The Flesh must suffer,'* it said. That was the last thing I wanted to hear.

"Do as you will. I will keep the Orphan distracted as long as I can, but he will come for you. You should be prepared for when he does."

'*I am not afraid. He will come too late. The fates can see it.*' the shadow responded.

"Good," he smiled, "I'll leave this matter in your capable hands."

I didn't see that man again after that day, but I did become all too well equated with the other presence. It remained in the room with me, moving about as a shadow that leaked restlessly from one corner to the next. It preyed on the rats that scurried in the building and grew stronger each day.

At night it would take on a noncommittal shape. It loosely formed the figure of a person and came to sit on the floor beside me. In the dim light, I could see its red eyes glowing back at me. *'The Flesh must suffer,'* it whispered repeatedly, and I shivered. I was already suffering, but I knew it meant something else.

Radomir visited less and less frequently. It looked like he was uncomfortable being in the same room with it for any length of time. Especially as its structure was gradually becoming more solid. By my count, two more weeks passed like this. But I can't be sure, I was tired, hungry, and cold. I wondered how much longer I would last.

The night came when the Witch finally took a lasting form. A familiar fear filled me as she compiled herself into the embodiment of a woman; I had seen something like her before. However, this one was somehow different from the last. Her skin was naturally dark, and her hair was incredibly long, braided all the way to her waist. She was beautiful in a terrifying way, and while her expression wasn't unkind, her presence deeply unsettled me.

She reached out to touch my face, caressing my cheek in her hand as she leaned in to whisper in my ear, "It is almost time now. The *Flesh* must

suffer.”

“I *am* suffering.” I assured her, then I tried to reason, “But you can just let me go. It’s not too late to do that.”

At this, she laughed. It was a strange sound, far off and simultaneously too close; it echoed unnaturally in the small room. Then, to my surprise, she turned and left. When she returned, it was late at night. I only knew she was there because the doorway dimmed as she passed through it. She carried what looked like herbs, a bunch of twigs, and a knife in her hands. She laid the items out very carefully on the floor before me, then stuffed some of the herbs in her mouth and started chewing them.

“What are you doing?” I questioned, hoping to at least delay her in whatever was coming next.

She regurgitated the herbs out onto her hand to answer me, “The Flesh must be *prepared*.”

The change in phrase was refreshing at least. However, she then put the soggy half-crushed plant back in her mouth and continued to masticate it. If I had anything to throw up, I probably would have at that point. While she chewed, she took up the knife. Its blade glinted in the darkness, and I heard her shuffle along the floor over to me.

“Wait, wait, wait. Can we talk about this for a minute?” I tried, straining to recoil from her as much as I could, knowing nothing involving a knife at this point would be good. This time she didn’t answer. However, I felt her hands in my hair and heard the soft slice as she cut some of it off near my ear. I’m not exactly sure what she did with it, but I believe she put it in her mouth to munch along with the herbs.

“My three-monthly haircut isn’t due yet, just so you know,” I informed her as she continued to ignore me.

The witch sat on the floor for the remainder of the night. I could hear her making something and the wet slosh of the concoction in her mouth. As daylight broke, I was able to see that she was making charms; they were neatly made with sticks, rat bones, and her own hair. Periodically she would spit some of the herbs onto each and smear it in.

She moved in and out of the room at irregular intervals during the day. I could tell she was doing something in the next room, but I couldn’t see what exactly from my position. In the afternoon, Radomir entered. He saw

the charms on the floor and scrunched his nose in disgust. “Filthy,” he muttered as he carefully stepped over them to approach me.

“At least you didn’t have to listen to her making them all night-”

“ ***Quiet*** ,” he ordered, cutting me off and my jaw locked up obediently. “ ***You are not to resist*** .” He began to undo the cables from my legs and chest, and I was a little confused. I didn’t need the bathroom; I was far too dehydrated for that by now. So I wasn’t sure what was happening as he unlatched the cord from the bolt behind and allowed me to stand.

“ ***Walk to the next room*** ,” he commanded, and I began to move. Although my knees nearly gave out on me when I did. It was a strange sensation. My body was almost too weak to follow the order on its own, but whenever I faltered, an unnatural pain flared up from within, forcing me to continue on.

Entering back into the main part of the building, it was clear some major upgrades had happened. A massive pentagram had been carved into the concrete floor, and hanging from the ceiling above was a second pentagram mirroring the first. It was made of interwoven tree branches suspended from taut threads like bones in a museum. The Witch stood waiting in the center of it all, and she beckoned for Radomir to bring me to her.

“ ***Kneel*** .” The new instruction came as we reached the heart of the pentagram, and I obediently sank to my knees before the Witch. Radomir then re-secured my bindings to the floor. Leaving me unable to stand or remove myself from the middle of the symbol. Panic was beginning to set in. I had a feeling this was *especially* not good.

“Do you need anything else? Or can I leave now? I don’t want to be here when *your* kind of magic fills the air,” he sneered.

She didn’t answer him, simply pointed toward the door for him to leave, and he took the invitation without hesitation. The Witch waited for him to go, then retrieved the charms she had made from the other room and placed one at each point of the pentagram. When she was done, she turned her attention to me, and my insides withered.

The Witch moved about making her final preparations. She brought over a handful of thin rat bones and placed metal bowls with flames around for light as the sunset. When she seemed good and ready, she came to sit uncomfortably close in front of me with a knife in hand. “This is getting a little too freaky for me now,” I commented. That seemed to amuse her

although she maintained her silence, and I realized she was still holding something in her mouth.

She took the knife up, and I drew a sharp breath in. My heart was pounding, *this was it.* I closed my eyes in anticipation as the blade cut into my flesh. However, she had created only a small incision on my chest above the heart. Considering what I had been expecting, this was mild, and I opened my eyes again unsurely. As I watched, she spit some of the herbs and hair back into her hand.

“Oh… No, no, *please,* no.” I begged as I realized what she was about to do. In response, she smiled, then smeared the paste into the open wound. It burned as if she had just poured alcohol into it, and a red energy sparked as she pressed it in. I shouted in agony, trying to get impossibly further away from the source of the pain.

“Shhhh~” the sound came from her throat, and she leaned in to kiss my lips; causing me to gag as she forced some of the mixture into my mouth.

I nearly choked as she held my nose and mouth, forcing me to swallow the vile concoction. As I gasped for air she took up one of the small bones from nearby and plucked a few strands of her own hair to make a needle and thread.

Without any hesitation, she began to sew the cut closed. Pushing the blunt bone needle through the stretchy skin until it popped out the other side. Before looping it over and slowly pulling the long hair tight to force the two halves of the cut back together.

She took her time in this same way with each stitch. Of course, I squirmed and swore under my breath, but she cared not at all. To my dismay, she repeated this process several more times, cutting the skin, spit mixture, smear, sew. Over and over. I don’t know how many she got up to before I lost consciousness.

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Chapter 29
Eric’s Friends are Scary

Charles Walsh: December, 1998.

I can’t be sure how long I was out, but as I came back around I immediately felt that something was wrong. I was no longer tied, and it was hard to open my eyes, as if they were being forced closed. I felt warm and heavy. A regrettably familiar pain electrified my veins, and I knew then that I wasn’t alone in my own body anymore. To further my horror, I realized I could hear voices…

“Charles! Charlie!” It was my name, but it was spoken in a strained octave, and sounded far from me. If I didn’t know better, I would have said it was my little sister who had spoken.

A hand rested on my knee, and the back of a cold hand under my chin tilted my head up. “…Alive, at least.” I was sure that was Eric; it’s hard to mistake his voice. I don’t know why he sounded so relieved. Couldn’t he tell something was wrong? He pressed his forehead to mine as he spoke again.

“Charles… Can you hear me? You have to fight this. I can’t help you if you don’t fight it…” he whispered.

I couldn’t make sense of what he was saying, but I wanted to tell him that he needed to run. Both he and Claire needed to leave. My skin was starting to burn, and Eric moved back.

“Claire, this is too dangerous for you now. You need to leave.”

“If you’re not leaving, I’m not!”

God, my sister was stubborn.

There was a hiss of movement through the air, and Claire screamed. Metal connected sharply against something, and Eric swore softly.

“Just as the fates predicted, you’re too late, Little Pet.” The Witch's strange voice echoed; she seemed pleased.

“Don’t call me that,” Eric stated firmly, largely ignoring her statement. He sounded further away now.

There was another brief moment of quiet before the sound of metal sliding against leather signified that he had drawn his sword, and the fighting began. I could hear the air displacement between people navigating quickly around each other and the twang of weapons clashing together, skin slicing, and blood dripping onto the floor. Stranger still was that I could unverifiably *feel* who was where. I knew, for example: that my sister was by the scaffolding toward the back on the left, and I could tell Eric was somewhere close to the Witch.

My senses were heightened, pressure was building behind my eyes, and my will was being suppressed rapidly. Until all at once, the world suddenly came back into focus, and my eyes snapped open. "'Finally.'" The word came from my mouth, but it was not my own. The voice was lower than mine was naturally and had a rougher texture. It was *wrong*.

A rush of power surged as an energy ignited from within, burning my nerves as it surfaced. We turned slowly, looking around the room. I could see so much more than before with my human eyes. The aura that surrounded the Witch was massive. It stretched upward almost to the second floor and was bright at the point of concentration in the palms of her hands, then dissipated outward into a darker red color as she wielded it.

Looking at Claire, there was a stark difference. What surrounded her was more like a white lining. It didn't move or flicker; rather, it emitted like a glow from all around her. I assumed that was what humans looked like to *other* things? Our attention turned to Eric, and I saw his aura for the second time. It was the same as before, a shimmering blue and gray energy that twisted like a slow, steady flame. I had once considered it massive; I now understood it was much smaller than the Witch's, and that made me concerned. Did it mean he had less of whatever it was?

'Yes,' the answer to my question echoed through my mind. 'We will kill him now.'

'No, I don't want to do that.' I thought in protest, and in response, a deep laugh rattled through my chest. The thing possessing me was laughing at me, with my *own* lungs.

We proceeded towards Eric as he concentrated on the Witch, and I began to worry that we were going to catch him by surprise. His eyes flicked over to me momentarily, and he readjusted to move away. Good, at least he understood I wasn't his friend right now. However, a spear began forming

in my hand as we approached. I was sure it was made of nothing other than pure, concentrated energy, but the weight of it sent waves of pain up my arm.

The thing in me launched it at Eric with incredible precision, while at the same time, the Witch struck out at him. Somehow he managed to narrowly avoid both attacks. However, the resulting explosion sent chunks of concrete flying, and as he was distracted by that, the Witch caught hold of him.

Her energy burned through his, and he cursed as she threw him away into a wall. Then, to my dismay, before he could recover, my body suddenly moved faster. In less than a moment, I was holding him by the throat and slamming him back into the wall with enough force to crack the concrete. Fresh blood trickled down through his dark hair, and he grimaced.

“You have to fight it.” He hissed in pain, and I heard myself laugh.

“‘He can’t hear you now,’” the voice that wasn’t my own lied as it answered for me.

Another power surge was beginning to build, when suddenly something hit me across the back of the head. It didn’t truly hurt, but it was surprising. The thing inside me hesitated, confused, as the lump of debris bounced off us and rolled across the floor. We turned slowly to see Claire holding a pipe, ready to swing it. “Let him go! He’s your friend Charles!” she shouted. She was trembling. I wondered what I looked like to her now for my little sister to look at me with so much fear.

“You’re going to kill him! He’s your friend!” she repeated, “He tried so hard to find you, and I said some horrible things to him that I haven’t apologized for yet, so you can’t kill him before I do that-”

We dropped Eric and cut Claire off mid-sentence. All of our attention turned to her, and we hit her with enough energy to send her flying across the room. She landed heavily against the scaffolding and didn’t move again. I believed I had killed her outright, and my heart broke. That seemed to delight the other spirit; I could feel its pure joy over my agony.

‘One down.’ It told me, and that sparked an anger I didn’t even know I had. It seared away the pain to form an iron resolve. From then on, I was fighting it. Every move it tried to make with my body, I protested. It felt like I was doing nothing as we looked back to try and find Eric again.

He was climbing to the second level, and we rushed over to pull him down again. Thankfully he was ready for us this time, and as we reached up to grab him, he stabbed a sword through my shoulder. I would forgive him for that later. It hurt, as expected, but it seemed to actively burn the thing inside me, and its presence temporarily withdrew from my shoulder. Until it pulled the sword out, at least.

“Silver. Hurts, doesn’t it?” Eric taunted, but I knew he was giving me a clue.

“‘Silence,’” it responded as we pursued him.

Below us, the Witch was starting to carve more symbols into the floor, and I understood she was going to summon more demons if she completed them. I was distracted momentarily by this realization, and when I refocused on Eric, I saw that he was trapped. We’d chased him to the part of the building where the upper layer had collapsed, and he was standing on the edge.

“‘Nowhere left to run~’” it mocked him.

Eric glanced over the edge, he was calculating the distance. “Charles, now would be a good time for you to do something.”

I don’t think he understood I was already doing everything I could.

“‘Charles is gone.’” The thing informed him, and Eric grit his teeth. Did he believe that? I couldn’t tell.

It began to charge up again, making another spear from the energy, and as it threw it at him, I did my best to offset its aim. I can’t say how well I did, but it didn’t land a direct hit. Regardless, it was still enough to push Eric off the edge, and he fell with a small flare of energy to cushion his fall.

He got up slowly from the pile of rubble, stumbling as he did. The blue aura around him was burning low now, and I could tell he was in pain. I didn’t want to think about what would happen if he ran out of magic, but the thing was only too keen to inform me. ‘If he runs out, he dies,’ it purred as we pursued him.

We ran straight off the edge after him and landed perfectly, creating a small crater when we did. However, I realized we couldn’t see Eric. My eyes moved from side to side as it looked for him, straining to find him. Fortunately, he found us first. He came through the cloud of dirt suddenly

and caught us by surprise with an uppercut punch to the lower jaw that knocked us backward. I had never been so happy to be punched.

I stumbled, and before we could recover, he was back. He ran the silver sword through my side, causing the thing in me to howl in pain and hope bubbled within me. He was going to do it. He would be able to kill us; then he could stop the Witch and save Claire. It was going to be okay…

The hope I had shattered when instead, he slipped. I don't know whether it was dizziness from his head injury, the slick of his blood on an uneven surface, or the last black symbol evaporating from the hip of his left leg. It didn't matter. The second he faltered; it was over. Energy formed in my hand like a red-hot dagger and aimed directly toward his heart. I used every last drop of willpower I could find to stop it, but I couldn't. It was going to hit, and I knew it.

However, at that exact moment, the air pressure changed. There was a deep resonance, followed a beat later by a sudden sharp crack as the air rapidly expanded all at once. It was a blue energy that ignited violently, sending sparks in all directions, and entirely devouring the red energy we gave off. I had no idea how Eric managed that.

It was so bright that I was temporarily blinded, and I found myself completely disorientated until the intensity of it died down. I couldn't make sense of what had happened initially. It wasn't Eric's magic. Instead, there was a man I had never seen before, holding my fist in one hand while keeping Eric from falling with the other.

He was no older than I, younger maybe even, and had short ash white hair. His eyes burned teal in color, and the aura he had flared behind him like wings. The expression this man had was one of pure, unadulterated rage, and a sense of fear coursed through the thing possessing me. To be perfectly honest, it scared me too.

"Nathaniel, don't kill him!" Eric shouted. The panic was clear in his voice, and the next thing I knew, we were thrown backward. The force of it pushed us through two walls before we came to rest in the crater of the third. I coughed on dust; it felt like every bone in my body had broken.

The situation had completely changed now. In addition to this man, two others had arrived. A girl with white hair, who I recognized right away from

the snow, and a taller man beside her. The girl’s aura was the same as Claire’s, a human, while the second man's was blue, like the other.

Eric noticed them too, and begrudgingly allowed himself to sink to the floor. He coughed violently, wiping away the bright red blood that trickled from his mouth with his sleeve as he leaned back against the wall, exhausted. Nathaniel knelt down with him, “Are you alright?” he asked tensely.

“Just, spectacular,” Eric answered sarcastically.

The man looked less than pleased with his remark, “Wait here. I’ll take care of this.”

“Wait, please don’t kill him…”

Nathaniel seemed to struggle to find an answer for him. Instead, he reached out to touch Eric’s hair lightly, and when his fingertips came away bloody his expression turned cold. “I’ll make you a deal. As long as you draw breath, I won’t kill him. But if you die here, I *will* ensure his life ends miserably, understand?”

“That’s unfair,” Eric murmured, and I understood him to mean that he wasn’t sure he was going to live.

“Those are the terms,” Nathaniel responded firmly as he now turned his attention to the other two. “Markos, take care of the Witch. Calla, stay with Eric.” He barked the orders, and they moved immediately to do as they were told.

Then he turned to me. His eyes held more hatred than they had before, and I was sure he intended to kill us. He rushed forward, and the thing responded quickly to avoid him. Everything hurt more now, my body was failing with all the injuries. We weren’t as fast as before, simply because it was slow to move on broken bones.

The battle didn’t last long after that. When we met head-on with Nathaniel, our energies clashed explosively, pushing us both back like two positive ends of a magnet. But that didn’t stop him. I watched as his aura dimmed on the approach, and then flared again as we connected. I got the impression that he knew how to manage it far better than the thing possessing me did.

Now, I don’t know what happened to the Witch. But eventually, we were cornered. Nathaniel kept us restrained with a hand on my neck and placed

his free hand over the first cut the Witch had made on my chest. I'm not sure what he did, but the pain was breathtaking. I have never felt anything like that in my life, and I hope never to feel it again. Far worse than the last possession. I could feel the demon burning alive within me; it screamed. *I* screamed, and when it was over, I knew I was going to pass out.

However, as I struggled to maintain consciousness, Nathaniel returned to Eric. He gave some instruction to the white-haired girl, and she began to make her way over to me. He then spoke louder to Markos, ordering him to get my sister. The man obliged and picked her up effortlessly. She hung limp in his arms… *She was definitely dead,* I thought.

"Will you pass out? I can't carry you, but I can support you. You need to walk." The white-haired girl spoke without emotion as she came to sit beside me. Not that I was really listening.

Instead, I was watching across the room. Eric seemed mostly gone, but his eyes fluttered slightly when Nathaniel crouched down with him. "Did you kill him?" he asked softly.

"Not yet," he responded calmly.

"Thank you," Eric murmured, starting to close his eyes.

"Don't." Nathaniel said with a slight edge to his voice as he gently tilted Eric's chin up, "Remember our terms. It's only as long as you draw breath that I don't kill him."

"That's so unreasonable… I don't think… I have much choice anymore…" he admitted softly. He sounded calm still, but I could tell it was the wrong kind of calm. It was the kind you see in people with no more energy for anything else as they fade away. "Please don't kill him…" he made the final request as he closed his eyes to rest.

I couldn't see the auras anymore without the demon's eyes, so I couldn't tell if Eric's had gone out completely. However, Nathaniel hesitated, petting his hair gently as he seemed to come to some kind of a decision. "You're the one who told me once that we always have a choice." He murmured; his expression unreadable as he leaned in closer. His lips brushed against Eric's, and he breathed a blue orb into his mouth before he slowly pulled away.

The moments immediately after passed with unbearable slowness. I'm not sure what I was waiting for exactly. But when Eric coughed and winced

in Nathaniel’s arms, that was good enough for me. Relief crashed over me like a tsunami, and the world slipped into blackness.

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Chapter 30
Some of us are Better at Keeping Pets than Others

Markos Bellerose: December, 1998.

Recount: 1930 – 1998.

“That fucking little-” I swore, perturbed as I watched my *beautiful* cherry red Mustang screaming through the castle alleyways. I winced as metal scraped against stone and prayed the damage would be minimal.

“That will leave a mark,” Calla commented calmly beside me.

“Yes. Thanks for pointing it out,” I answered her, irritated as I turned to go and find Nathaniel. Of all the poor choices he had made in regard to Eric *Linnaeus,* this was the final straw. When I reached his office, the doors were closed and locked with magic, that was a sign that he wasn’t in a good mood. But I didn’t let it stop me.

“You let him take my car!” I accused, pushing the doors open with explosive force to find him lying on the couch beside the window with an arm over his eyes.

“I didn’t *let* him do anything. If he took your car, it was to spite you,” he responded dully without moving.

“You *allowed* him to leave,” I countered. “Now get up. You can’t sulk here.”

“I could, if you would leave and shut the door again.”

“You shouldn’t have let him go. We need him.”

“We don’t *need* him. And I don’t want to have this conversation again, Markos.” He complained, and I ignored it as I continued.

“You are the one who argued to keep him. Demanded he be trained, *insisted* he be kept alive despite the *numerous* warnings from your brother, and everyone else. You made him to be a weapon. We need that weapon now, and you just let it speed out of here.”

Nathaniel sat up to glare at me; he looked tired and irritated. Good.

“Do you not remember what happened last time I tried to control him!? He sparked a fifty-year-long war! What part of you truly believes it’ll go well if I force him to do anything he doesn’t want to do?” he snapped.

“You can lie to yourself as much as you want, but you won’t fool me. You won’t command him because you are afraid to do so. You treat him as an equal, as if his feelings have any importance. He is nothing more than a means to an end.”

“Is that all Calla is to you?” he retorted bluntly.

“Yes! Nathaniel, yes. Just like my own mother was, Calla is nothing more than property. She would lick my boots if I asked her to.”

“You feel no bond to her? You care nothing for her at all?”

“No,” I answered simply. “Do you care for the boy? Is that what your problem is?”

“Leave. This conversation is over,” he commanded instead of answering. Perhaps I had pushed him too far.

“I beg of you to see reason here. It is not too late. Send me out after him, Calla and I should have no trouble bringing him back.” I tried.

“You will do no such thing. Now, get *out* of my office!” He shouted, and the room vibrated dangerously with his energy.

I knew then that arguing further was pointless. I gave a low bow and took my leave; however, I left the door open to spite him.

Of all the people to inherit the gene, he deserved it the least. I was already fully grown when the twins were born, and so I was tasked with teaching them how to harness it. His brother lacked the confidence to use it, while Nathaniel excelled. By the time he was ten, he already had a better understanding of how to use it than I. So that when he reached our equivalent of a teenager, he was extremely capable, and equally as lazy. It was irritating to say the least.

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As children, the twins were fiercely competitive. The eldest would start a project, and the youngest would be so eager to join in that the entire thing often ended in failure, as they fought over it instead. Eric was just another

of Nathaniel's projects that he tried to keep from his brother. I remember the day he first brought him home.

Nathaniel was barely of age. I suppose to humans, he may have appeared to be a young adult, but we considered him to be something closer to a late teenager. Impulsive, short-sighted, and reckless. Not much between the ears, as some might say, and I don't believe he ever truly thought anything through.

As it were, I had just passed Nathaniel's sleeping quarters when he opened the door a crack. "Markos," he whispered.

"Nathaniel," I greeted him at a regular volume, "Is there something you need?"

"Yes. Come here; I need your help with something. And don't talk so loud!" he answered anxiously. That piqued my interest. He had been melancholy for weeks, and it wasn't every day that the calmer twin behaved so secretively.

I approached his room cautiously, and he allowed me inside. His room was, as always, unnecessarily cluttered. Decorative ornaments covered every surface, books overflowed the shelving and his desk, while oriental silk tapestries hung over the walls. Despite this, I noticed the human child immediately.

It was sitting quietly on the edge of the bed, staring blankly at the floor. He seemed unharmed but was rather dirty. Covered in blood and ashes, he smelt like a forest fire, and looked tired. Moreover, despite being formally dressed for his brothers' event, Nathaniel was covered in small burns.

"Flame grilling your late-night snack didn't go so well?" I mused.

"What? No! He's not food," he hissed back, lowering his voice so the child couldn't hear. "He's-.. Well, he's…"

"A pet?" I offered as he struggled.

"Yes, no, sort of? He's *not* to be eaten. Or harmed. But I haven't decided what I'm going to do with him yet."

"Then why did you bring him here?"

"Do you remember the orphan boy I was telling you about?"

"The one you said died of pneumonia?"

“Yes. He didn’t die. But he couldn’t stay at the orphanage anymore… So I brought him here.”

“Your brother won’t be pleased.”

“Well, we’re not going to tell my brother now, *are we*?” He warned with hostility, “I just need you to check him over. Make sure he’s not injured.”

“Very well,” I agreed; it’s hardly my place to argue with my superiors.

Upon inspection, the boy had a useless left leg, from an old disease I suspected. But otherwise seemed unharmed, if not a little listless. I relayed this information to Nathaniel, and he seemed relieved. He crouched down in front of the boy and placed a hand gently on his cheek.

“You’re going to be okay,” he told the child softly.

“Does he speak?” I inquired.

“Yes, but he hasn’t since we left the orphanage.”

“I mean it when I say your brother won’t tolerate this. If you don’t want to kill him, release him onto the streets.”

“He would die on his own… look at him. His eyes are like sapphires.”

I rolled my eyes. He said something similar when he tried to smuggle a manticore into his parents' castle. That had also ended badly when his father found out, and he had sworn to me that he would never care about anything again. However, watching him fawn over his new ‘rescue’ project, I knew it was about to start all over.

“Nathaniel. *Please* listen. You can’t keep him. You don’t know how to take care of a human child, he will grow too quickly, and then he will become a threat.”

“I’m not a child, Markos. I can look after him,” he stated, annoyed.

“Oh? Tell me, how many times a day must he eat? Have you even fed him yet? Or given him any water?” I demanded, and immediately Nathaniel looked guilty. It was obvious he had done none of those things.

“I called you here for your help, not your judgment. Just tell me what I should do. And don’t you dare say ‘get rid of him’. He’s staying, and that’s final.”

“Fine,” I sighed, “You should take him to Ávila. She raises the human girls. She will know what to do with him.”

“Thank you,” he stated flatly.

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Of course, Achaicus found out less than a day later, and that was when Nathaniel decided that Eric was his choice as a pet. For some time after that, they were nearly inseparable. Nathaniel feared that if he left the boy unattended, his brother would have him killed. It was a justifiable concern, considering that is precisely what Achaicus asked me to do; should I be provided the opening to do so.

Unfortunately, the opportunity never arose as Eric was placed in the crèche with the other pets, which meant he was seldom unsupervised. A wise move on Nathaniel’s part. Although it seemed that keeping his pet was beneficial for him after all, it pushed him to be more responsible, and he took on more of the duties he should have already been doing. He also seemed to be in a far better mood most days.

To begin with, the boy was only placed into the theory classes with the other pets. That was until after Lucinde’s visit, then he was permitted to join the physical classes with them. However, that resulted in Eric being sent to my infirmary daily with a new injury each time. He was woefully less skilled than they were, despite Nathaniel’s lessons, and it showed with each new bruise, cut, and broken bone I treated.

I suppose I could have ended his life then, for we were often alone. However, I came to learn something about him that gave me pause. Nathaniel had once mentioned the child had severe pneumonia, yet there was no evidence of such, no scarring or otherwise on his lungs. That was mildly interesting. Furthermore, there was one other abnormality: his bones were notched from magic, and I wasn’t entirely certain of what it meant.

When asked about it, the child seemed unaware, and I wondered if Nathaniel knew. He certainly didn’t seem to, but I supposed if he himself was the one to place such magics, then *of course* he would deny it. Although I couldn’t imagine he would have allowed me to treat the boy knowing I would notice, perhaps he simply hoped I would not? Regardless, I dared not speak of it with him, for if he was not the one responsible, I didn’t want to give away such a valuable piece of information.

After he fell during the twenty-second test, Nathaniel granted Eric the ability to walk, and the frequency of his injuries decreased significantly. In fact, he excelled in the classes and was almost unrivaled, except for my Calla, and another pet named Loree. There was relative peace in the castle for a time until Eric reached his later teenage years.

You see, when the girls begin to bleed, they are taught what to expect from their bodies. It is necessary that they have a good understanding of their own health if they are to bear our children. In the past, we lost some in the course of their pregnancies, or during childbirth, only because they were uneducated and chose to hide from us.

As a result, they now receive a very comprehensive education on the matter and are taught what to do in emergency situations should they find themselves unattended. We haven't lost one since. Naturally, much of it wouldn't apply to Eric, but we didn't see it necessary to modify the curriculum for him. He attended those same lessons so that at least he would be able to assist.

However, of course, that meant he would learn of how children are made. Humans are very hormonal creatures, and he was the only male among the females. This sparked new animosity between the brothers for obvious reasons. Eric was never caught with any of them, but it was still a possibility. In particular, I was personally concerned for my Calla, as she seemed to take a liking to him. I commonly found them together, talking or sparring, which made me somewhat nervous. Luckily nothing seemed to come of it.

When Eric saw the slaughterhouse, things began to change for the worse… However, it was taking him with us to Leúchtend that truly began the war. By then, the Orphan had become unruly, he destroyed half of the Dunkel castle, and despite Achaicus begging his brother to end Eric's life, Nathaniel still refused. I will never understand why.

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The last I had seen of Eric, until recently, he was walking with Achaicus, Molly, and Calla toward the ballroom at Leúchtend on the final night of our stay. Guards stopped Nathaniel and I to announce that Lazarus had

summoned us. He glanced sideways at me to see if I knew anything of it, and I returned his nonverbal question with a slight shrug.

We were directed away toward Lazarus's office. It was located on the other side of the castle, which could easily become a twenty-minute walk if you didn't know which hallways to take. However, as we stepped into the portrait hall, called such due to the lack of windows and excess of paintings, either end of the hallway sealed. Effectively trapping us where we were. There was a soft click, and salt poured down from the ceiling. Nathaniel seemed to understand what was happening before I did, but neither of us could react in time before we were effectively smothered in sodium.

Salt doesn't burn the way iron does, unless it gets into your eyes, however, it serves to nullify magic, and Lazarus spared no expense. I suspect he used the entire supply of salt at the castle to ensure his son's magic was fully suppressed. I don't know how long Nathaniel lasted under it, but as my energy fizzled to nothing I lost consciousness.

When I woke next, I was in the dungeons of Leúchtend.

It is not a desirable place to be. The dungeons are located far beneath the castle, in what was once a naturally occurring cavern. They are only accessible through the long staircase at the furthest end. Each cell was individually carved into the cave wall so that there are bars only on the front-facing side of each, while the remaining walls and floor are made of ironstone. Making it subsequently impossible to dig your way out.

In addition to this, seawater constantly seeps in through small cracks in the stone. This means there is an everlasting dampness to make the entire experience profoundly more miserable. A thick layer of salt scum and rust coats every surface, and the entire place smells of seaweed. It is where you put those who you wish to forget.

As it were, in my cell were the salt-crusted remains of the previous occupant, and I could only assume that was to be my fate as well. I knew I would last a few days without food and less without water, but I was most nervous about the iron. My face, hands, and arms were uncovered. I had regrettably chosen a top with a triangular cut out over my upper chest and no sleeves to wear to the gala. If I were to relax and my exposed skin touched the stone, I would undoubtedly blister.

There is no way of keeping time in the dungeons, so I cannot say how long I was down there before footsteps came down the stairs and a light approached. I didn't hold high hopes that they were coming for me. Calla had most likely been killed, pets are commonly slaughtered when their masters are imprisoned for obvious reasons, and Nathaniel was probably in no better position than I, if he lived at all. So I doubted anyone else would come for me.

Furthermore, my family is too feeble to speak out against the Klein family, so I knew they would not act, and I was sure Achaicus was well aware of this entire situation. In fact, I suspected he had caused it and, therefore, would make no efforts to free me. Because of this, I didn't so much as bother to see who it was until the cloaked figure approached my cell with a lantern in hand.

I squinted against the light, and the person lowered their hood. I was surprised to see long honey-brown hair and realized immediately that it was Molly.

"What are you doing here?" I scowled. I knew it was pointless to try and command her into releasing me. It was a poorly kept secret that Achaicus had illegally contracted her to obey only his order.

"Master Achaicus sent me. He has an offer to make you," she spoke calmly.

"And what is that?" I asked bitterly, far be it from me to turn down an offer that might hold some interest.

She paused for a moment, and her eyes glowed blue faintly as Achaicus spoke through her. "'*Nathaniel escaped the castle. But Father has sent out orders for his death. They are searching for him as we speak. I need you to find him before Father's men do.*'"

"Funny you should care now. This was your doing, wasn't it?" I asked casually.

"'…*Will you help or not?*'" The response came after a delay.

"What do I receive in return?"

"'*To begin, your life. Of course, if you would prefer to remain in your cell, that is acceptable too.*'"

“Very well. It’s hardly a difficult choice to make.” I assured quickly, before standing and moving over to the bars.

“‘*Markos. If you attack Molly once she releases you, I will personally see to it that your life ends miserably.*’”

I smiled to myself; I had intended on doing exactly that. Perhaps Achaicus was cleverer than I assumed.

“Of course, I would do no such thing. Tell me, what fate did my Calla suffer?”

“‘*She is safe, for now. Molly will escort you to her.*’”

“How generous,” I mused; I can’t say I wasn’t surprised to hear my pet had lived. Nathaniel must have protected her.

Molly’s eyes dimmed, and I knew Achaicus was gone.

She allowed me out shortly after, and I came to learn that she was the last person to have seen Nathaniel. That was helpful. When I was reunited with ma Petite Poupée, I was more than a little distressed to see the state she was in. Achaicus had finished cutting her hair short all around so that it was now a bob *and* dyed black! She was also wearing the clothes of a common housemaid, but we won’t even discuss that atrocity.

We left Leúchtend, regrettably through the sewer system, and followed the directions Molly had given me. Avoiding Lazarus’s men proved to be somewhat of a challenge; they were crawling all over the place. One could hardly take a single step without spotting one of his spies, and my magic was still weakened. It was lucky that Calla was well trained, for I relied on her heavily to navigate for us.

When we reached where Molly had last seen Nathaniel, I doubted he lived. Dried blood spotted the area, and only the faint residue of his magic was left. Nonetheless, we continued. I had Calla cover the area with dirt to hide our presence, and we followed the blood path through the woods. Still, it was almost another day before we found him.

He had secured himself in an abandoned hunter's cabin, and nearly took my head off when I opened the door. Regardless, it was plain to see he had pushed himself too far. He was bloody and bruised. His back was torn and looked rather infected. When I tried to heal it, I realized that the wounds were burned from iron, and magic cannot heal that kind of injury.

“Watch it.” He winced as I cleaned the wounds out the old fashion way with a damp cloth.

“Don’t move. It’ll only take longer if you do.”

“Then hurry up about it,” he muttered.

“I’ll do my best. Care to tell me what happened? You look like a cat threw you up. And where is your little pet?”

“Like you’re one to talk. You look like you sat in salt for a year,” he retorted, annoyed.

“It certainly felt like it,” I agreed with a smile.

“Good,” he grumbled half-heartedly, before answering my original question. “Eric is dead.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Well, your father has also ordered that you die,” I informed him jauntily. I had a feeling he was lying about his pet but decided not to press him about it.

We rested there for only a few hours before moving on and stayed in no place for too long. The pace we moved out wore Calla out after three days; I suppose I can’t blame her for that. She was, after all, only human. I had wanted to leave her behind once her usefulness had expired; her contract would compel her to follow regardless. However, Nathaniel insisted we keep her with us, so we alternated carrying her until we arrived back at the Dunkel castle.

The news of what happened at Leúchtend hadn’t yet reached the Institute, and Nathaniel acted immediately to secure a barrier around it. In perhaps the most precise diplomatic action he had ever taken, he claimed the castle as his own. The other noble families were given the choice of supporting his claim or imprisonment. Unsurprisingly most chose to take his side.

Nathaniel is well-liked, and his father less so. Achaicus would ordinarily be the chosen heir, and it’s not as if many opposed his administration. However, given that he had chosen to remain with Lazarus, there was little choice, and Nathaniel was able to convince most to accept his leadership. The only one who did not was Lothar, and that wasn’t a loss in my opinion.

He had made advances on Calla in the years prior, and that never sat well with me. I don’t much care for men like him.

From then, we were quite straightforwardly winning the war. Some battles were bloodier than others, but our territory boundary remained intact. There were, of course, some internal disputes about the new policies Nathaniel enacted. However, they were easily resolved, and as a result, an uneasy stalemate settled over us for nearly half a century. They didn’t have the power to face us openly on our own land, and we didn’t have the numbers to face them on theirs.

However, this situation changed a few months back. I was in town with Calla; we were going to the fair, when she picked up a paper from the stand. Not much surprised my pet, but she faltered before gently placing it back down. Was she hoping I didn’t notice? *That would be interesting.*

“What is it ma Poupée?” I inquired curiously, and when she didn’t answer, I picked up the paper myself. It was a delightful interest piece on a female prisoner, and her mugshot was plastered on the front page. I recognized her immediately. Achaicus’s pet, Molly.

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Chapter 31
I Might be Jealous?

Calla: December, 1998 – January, 1999.

Recount: 1939.

“Calla.” I heard my name, and my eyes snapped open. It was still dark in the room. I must have fallen asleep by mistake. I had been sitting beside Eric’s hospital bed, resting my head in the palm of his hand while I waited for him to wake. He was injured badly while fighting a witch to save his friend, and neither of them had regained consciousness since. But the girl, Claire, had woken in the late afternoon the day prior.

“Yes,” I answered when I understood who had spoken.

“How is he?” It was Nathaniel; his eyes glinted with magic in the darkness.

“He has not woken,” I updated him as requested and he sighed, anxiously running a hand back through his hair.

“Not even for a moment?”

“No.”

Nathaniel had insisted we bring them to a private hospital, one that was close by and well-equipped. We told the staff that there had been a car accident, and they accepted that. The only problem was that it was a hospital run by humans. This meant that magical interference would draw attention, and break one of the founding laws, so it couldn’t be used to expedite the healing process. A fact that bothered Nathaniel greatly, while I suspected my master was using it as an excuse not to waste his energy on humans he cared little for.

“You’re so fucking reckless. You know that?” he spoke to Eric, and I remained quiet as he continued. “What if I hadn’t made it in time? You’d be dead right now. And your stupid friend would be a monster.”

A long moment of silence passed. I don’t know if he expected an answer. However, eventually, he seemed to give up on being angry and sat down on the other side of Eric’s bed. He reached out to gently brush the hair from his

face, and I would have been interested to know what he could have been thinking. I don't believe the Fae are capable of empathy or caring, but Nathaniel sometimes made me wonder.

Hours passed, the sun began to rise, and Eric didn't stir. Nurses came and went while Nathaniel alternated between sitting patiently and pacing back and forth restlessly. I supposed he was displeased to have to wait. Personally, I didn't like waiting either. Eric and I sometimes sat together in silence when we were children. So I imagined this to be like those times, and that helped me not to feel so sick.

My throat tightened as I considered that Eric might still die, and I moved over to the window. I didn't want to leave the room, but I needed to avoid Nathaniel seeing any expression cross my face. You see, we're not supposed to show emotion; they don't like to know that their food has feelings. It makes them uncomfortable, and I was required to mask any sentiment I might be experiencing. But I had known Eric from the time we were children and only recently found him again; I wasn't sure I could withstand losing him a second time.

Looking out at the snow-coated woods reminded me of the times we had sparred together in the forest. We grew up in the Dunkel Institute. For myself, it was all I had known. I wasn't even aware there was an outside world until Eric arrived. He was shy then, but still strong-willed. He disliked being told he couldn't do things and was very uncooperative with anyone who tried to control him.

He lived with us, although wasn't allowed to partake in the physical classes until he was eleven, and when he did, he was dreadfully outmatched. Of course, we were all two years older and a few inches taller than him, so it was easy to push him around. Eric was paired with me for combat training, and I showed him no mercy. I didn't consider him worth my time. None of us believed he would survive.

I was surprised when he asked for my help learning advanced weaponry, and I'm not sure why I agreed to train him. However, after that, we would meet each day in the woods behind the castle to practice, and he got better little by little. His master granted him a gift that allowed him to use magic to walk when he so chose, though he rarely used it. He told me that was because it had limits, and he didn't want to be reliant on it or use it all up in case of an emergency.

As the years passed, we got older. He grew handsome and taller than I, so that he was soon a challenge to face in combat. I truly had to concentrate if I didn't want him to knock me into the dirt. The first time he beat me, I knew it only because of the smirk on his face the moment before he held the back of a blade to my throat.

"I win," he purred, smitten with himself.

"Took you long enough," I answered indignantly.

No one had seen, and we never talked about it. However, from then I'll admit I chose to fight him less fairly in class. He was stronger than I was, and he picked up the skills annoyingly quick. It was like he was born to fight. He never publicly showed me up, of course. But whenever he saw the moment he would win between us, I can assure you, he had that same stupid expression on his face, and I made sure to target his weak leg for it.

I think he was happy to be at the Dunkel institute for the most part. However, the day he found out what the Fae are changed that. It was shortly before graduation. The masters had often taken him from our classes to send him into town. It was expected that he would return home with stray children, and he was very good at it. He knew exactly how to speak to them. I supposed that was because he himself was once an orphan, and he believed he was helping them…

Naturally, we were forbidden from telling him the truth. We learn of what our masters are when we are ten. It is a test we must pass, and those who fail do not continue in the program. He was not given the test, and I never wanted to be the one to tell him. I knew it would break him, and I couldn't bring myself to do it. Sometimes I regret that decision, perhaps if I had told him, he would have been more prepared for it.

After finding out, he tried to destroy the castle, and in response, his master placed restrictive commands on him. It was a miracle he was even allowed to live. He was to be supervised at all times, and I was assigned to watch over him much of the time by default, as my master is someone Nathaniel trusts. Although I wished I had not been. When we trained, it was as if he was trying to kill me, and the look in his eyes was pure hatred. He knew I had known and didn't tell him.

Regardless, he eventually forgave me, but I believe he only did so because he had little choice. After all, if he didn't, he would be entirely

alone in a castle full of monsters.

“Let’s run away together,” Eric suggested casually one day after training. We were alone deep in the woods at the time, sitting against the base of a large tree. The sunshine filtered down through the canopy, and the light danced across his dark hair as a gentle breeze moved the leaves above.

“What?” I was shocked as I looked over at him. It was treason to say such things.

“I can’t stay here anymore… Not knowing what they are, and what I did,” he murmured.

“You didn’t know,” I assured him simply. I couldn’t see why it bothered him so much. Perhaps the Fae weren’t the most benevolent creatures. But our every need was met, and they treated us well. If the price for that was the lives of some strangers, so be it. The problem was that children were afraid of me, and I couldn’t convince them to follow me the way he could. Even if I copied what he said word for word, the effect was lost.

“He’s going to command that I bring them more children. I can’t do it…”

“Yes you can,” I shrugged, “And if he gives the order, you will. No point in being upset about it.”

He was quiet then, and I could tell he was frustrated with me. It was something we would never agree on. Humans are a part of the food chain, sometimes, that means being at the bottom of it, and it’s not as if the Fae consume an overindulgent amount. They prey on the sick and the young, and only take what they need, just as nature intended.

The silence between us drew out before I spoke again, “It’s my birthday tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“It’s my *20th* birthday,” I specified.

“I know?” he repeated more unsurely.

He didn’t understand what I was trying to say, and I realized I needed to show him. Carefully I placed a hand on his thigh and leaned over to brush my lips against his. It wasn’t the only time I had kissed him, but it was the first time I had done so with intent, and his brow creased slightly in confusion.

“What was that for..?” he asked, clueless. Apparently, I was going to have to spell it out for him.

Taking in a breath, I got up and delicately stepped out of my underwear. Amazingly he was still confused, “What are you-?” The question died as I lifted the skirt of my dress and sat onto his lap. Understanding dawned and his eyes widened in surprise, he looked somewhat awkward.

“C-Calla, I-” he struggled. It was the first time I had seen a fault in his calm demeanor. He was nervous.

“I don’t want it to be Markos…”

“I understand; I just- I don’t know that I can do this...” he tried to tell me.

“It’s okay… I know what to do,” I assured him calmly. This was something I had already thought through. When we turn twenty, there is to be a bedding ceremony. It’s similar to marriage, I suppose, only it doesn’t grant us any rights to property or inheritance. It is intended to be between the graduate and their master to seal the bond.

However, I knew I wanted Eric to be my first time instead. I set a hand on his cheek and drew him into a deep kiss. He was tense, but his lips were dry and soft, and he returned the kiss with uncertainty. “Relax…” I whispered against his skin, “Hold me here, it’s okay.” I took his hand to place it on my breast and his face slowly turned flush.

I assumed he was just self-conscious, or maybe he didn’t want to do this on the ground in the woods? It was almost like he wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words.

“Are you okay..?” I asked at last, I wasn’t sure what else I could do to reassure him.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. I- I *really* have to tell you something though-” he tried again, but I cut him off, kissing him gently. Whatever it was, it could wait until after. This time he made more of an effort to return the gesture. It was like he was trying to convince himself of something, and I pressed closer to him, tangling my hands into his hair briefly.

He allowed me to undo the buttons of his shirt, and I traced my fingertips over his chest. It was smooth and muscular. Years of training had built him well and I took a moment to admire his physique. However, when I moved to undo his pants, he caught my wrist to stop me.

“Eric, it’s okay, I want this-” I started to reassure him again when I noticed the look in his eyes for the first time. It was a combination of shame and fear that gave me pause, “...But *you* don’t want this…” I murmured.

“I’m sorry- It’s not you, I swear it,” he said quickly.

I pulled away, humiliated. I think I wanted to cry, but I wasn’t entirely familiar with the feeling. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean-” I floundered, trying to vocalize how apologetic I was as I realized how uncomfortable he was.

“No, Calla. Please, it’s- I-I just…” He seemed almost frustrated with himself as he couldn’t voice the words.

“You’re in love with someone else?” I offered him.

“Something like that…”

“…Who?” I asked reluctantly. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“Not a girl…” he admitted quietly, and I finally realized what he was trying to say.

The moments that followed were equally as awkward as the ones prior and I removed myself from his lap. I was still processing what he had said, and he looked like he might be sick. I knew some of the others had made passes at him, and that he had politely sidestepped their advances, but I had assumed he had done so out of fear of getting in trouble. Now I understood, and we couldn’t look each other in the eye for almost a week after that.

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My attention returned to the current situation as I realized Nathaniel had never given Eric the order to collect more livestock, and I found myself wondering why? He was still sitting beside Eric, resting his face in his hands as he waited with a mildly annoyed expression. I had never considered asking him about it as it would be disrespectful to ask him any question, let alone one like that.

“Is there something you need?” he asked flatly when he noticed I was watching him.

“No,” I answered calmly, “I’m going to see if Eric’s friend has woken.”

“I’ll come with you,” he stated after a moment’s deliberation. “Apparently, Eric is choosing to be as stubborn about recovering as he is

with everything else, and I might just kill him myself if I don't take a walk."

"Of course," I agreed, giving a polite bow. I was certain he didn't mean it after all the effort he had gone to in order to be here.

The location spell for Charles had completed almost an entire day after Eric left the castle. Nathaniel and Markos had been discussing the war maps, while I waited patiently when the spell stopped. It caught Nathaniel's attention, and he glanced over at the paper. Then, without saying a word, he grabbed his coat and left the room. My master didn't notice at first as he continued talking before turning to see that he was gone.

"If we move to expand the southern border, that would give us more-?" Markos stopped, confused. "Where did he go?"

"He looked at the paper and left," I explained, gesturing to the door.

" ***Come*** ," he commanded of me as he stormed after Nathaniel.

By the time we entered the hallway, he had already rounded the corner, and we had to jog to catch up. Markos was quick to step in front of him, blocking his path, and the look he received for doing so was withering.

"Stand aside," Nathaniel hissed.

"You cannot go after him."

"I take it you saw what he is to face as well as I? He will die if I don't."

"Then so be it, Nathaniel. That boy has been nothing but trouble from the day you first brought him home." My master insisted, begging him to see reason. "This could be a trap or a distraction. You cannot leave; you must stay here to protect the castle."

"I'm not the only one who can protect the castle." He snorted as he moved to sidestep Markos.

"If your brother-"

"Achaicus will not attack the castle." He scoffed, cutting Markos off.

"How can you be certain?"

"Because I know my brother."

"And if it's a trap?"

"I will be fine."

"You **cannot** go alone."

“Then come with me, or don’t. But stop wasting my time.”

“You’ll never make it in time anyway!” Markos insisted; however he looked defeated as he gestured for Nathaniel to lead the way.

When we arrived, we saw summoned creatures fleeing into the woods, and upon entering the building, we were met with chaos. A witch was creating more summons, and Eric had just fallen from a ledge on the second story of the abandoned mall. Nathaniel’s eyes ignited with magic; the energy that radiated off him burned so furiously even *I* could see the sparks.

I had only seen him that angry once before, many years ago, and I wasn’t sure if it even compared. He vanished from beside us and was between Eric and the demon consuming Mr. Walsh so quickly that I didn’t see him move at all. The energy he released to deflect the creature away shone bright blue, and I was momentarily blinded. He barked orders at us and carried on dealing with the demon. So I cannot imagine Nathaniel would kill him now after such efforts. No matter what he might pretend.

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We traveled down the hall to the room Eric’s friend was placed in. Outside the sun was only beginning to rise and dull orange light illuminated the mist along the horizon. So it was a surprise that several people were already in Charles’s room waiting around his bed. I was familiar with a few of them from when I had been following him. The older man with a mustache and the plump woman from his work, the brown-haired girl from the diner, and an older couple I didn’t recognize.

When we entered, the Sheriff gave us a hard look, and Nathaniel smiled in amusement. That was unsettling. Could he tell Nathaniel wasn’t human? From only a glance?

“How is he?” Nathaniel asked personably.

“He’s fine.” The man responded gruffly while folding his arms.

“Has he woken yet?”

“No.”

“That’s unfortunate. I was hoping to speak with him.”

“Then, you’ll just have to wait, like everyone else.”

I couldn’t tell if his statement bothered Nathaniel or not, but his gaze settled on Charles for a long moment, as if he were making some kind of decision. Perhaps he was considering compelling the entire room into doing what he wanted. He was definitely capable of it. The tight smile he gave then confirmed my suspicions. However, he must have decided against it, for he turned to leave without saying anything further.

“Go check on Markos for me. He’s been in that girl’s room since she woke; make sure he’s not forgetting we need to restrict our usage of magic.” He muttered, then added, “And if he’s decided he was hungry, make sure the death looks natural or something.”

“I understand,” I assured as I moved to do as instructed.

It didn’t take me long to find my master. His voice was coming from down the hallway. “That’s not a good idea in your current state,” he warned, sounding strangely uncertain. *That was odd*, I thought; he never sounded unsure of anything.

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with what was a good idea, or not, last night~” It was Claire’s voice that taunted him in return. “Besides, I’m fine, it’s fine. Just help me up. I want to go see Charlie.”

When I entered the room, Markos was helping her to stand. She had sustained minor injuries, comparatively. Nothing more than a broken arm and eye socket resulting in a heavily blackened eye. However, I noticed right away that his expression was… Odd. Is it possible for someone to be simultaneously disgusted by, *and* concerned about something? I chose not to read too much into it.

When he realized I was there he looked entertained, “Calla? I thought you were waiting with Eric.”

“Yes. Nathaniel asked me to check on you.” I explained dully.

“I’m fine,” he assured, “Has his pet awakened?”

“Not yet.”

“Tell him we have to leave soon. He knows why.”

“Yes.” I bowed, moving to leave when Claire asked.

“Why did she need to check on you? Are you okay? Were you hurt too?” She sounded sickeningly concerned.

“I was to ensure he wasn’t using magic, and to help cover up your death if he had chosen to kill you,” I answered her calmly. Perhaps I shouldn’t have; I was not supposed to make such comments. However, the girl bothered me in a particular way that no one else had before, and it seemed that getting knocked out hadn’t made her any less annoying.

“What is wrong with you? ‘If he had chosen to kill me’? Seriously!?” She muttered in response, utterly horrified.

“Claire,” Markos warned; he sounded displeased. However, it seemed to have no effect on her, for she held a hand up to quieten him, something I would never have personally risked. Cows don’t answer back to their farmers, and I could tell from his look of pure astonishment, that he simply had no idea how to respond to her silencing him. That was probably the only reason she didn’t die right then.

“No. It’s not alright for her to just say things like that about you. Or to me, for that matter.” She told him, then turned to glare at me, “Markos isn’t some horrible monster. And if you think he is, then maybe he needs to get a new housekeeper. He’s funny and kind and has done **nothing** to hurt me. So you can tell *Nathaniel* to shut the fuck up and mind his own business. I mean, *really*, the threats and passive-aggressive glances between you all are disgusting.”

Shellshocked by her ignorance, I chose to say nothing else. Truthfully I’m not sure what confused me more, her believing Markos to be a benevolent creature, or her use of the terminology ‘*housekeeper*’. Additionally, I was most definitely *not* going to speak that way to Nathaniel. Eric might get away with it, but I certainly wouldn’t.

Feasibly I might have been too harsh on Claire, I couldn’t expect such a dim-witted human to understand anything more than she was shown, and whatever facade Markos was upholding with her, he was very dedicated to it. That in itself was confounding. Of course, I knew they were having some kind of affair, not that it bothered me. If she kept him ‘entertained,’ that meant I didn’t have to. But I didn’t fully understand why *he* was going to such lengths.

By the time I had returned to Eric’s side, Nathaniel was already there. Once again sitting in the chair beside him, he looked tired and was propping himself up with one elbow leaning against the bedside table.

“He still has not awoken,” I commented, returning to my place on the other side.

“No,” he answered drearily.

“Markos wishes to let you know that he wants to leave.”

“I already know that. Does the girl still live?”

“Yes.”

He made a small sound of annoyance, “What kind of game is he playing with that human?” he muttered.

“Perhaps he is trying to secure a contract.”

“For what? She holds no value.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, and we fell into an uncomfortable silence. I was never entirely sure what I was or was not allowed to say, or do, in his presence and that caused a certain level of stress. However, when I took Eric’s hand in mine, he made no comment against it, and so I assumed that was allowed.

The day passed agonizingly slow as we waited until, finally, Eric squeezed my hand, and his eyes fluttered open. “You’re awake,” I said softly.

“How is everyone else..?” he asked quietly. It was just like him to ask about others first, and despite his expression remaining devoid of emotion, he sounded almost like he was afraid to know.

“The girl and your friend live,” Nathaniel answered him calmly.

“I’m going to go see them then.” Eric began to try and sit up, but Nathaniel automatically stopped him from moving further by placing a hand on his chest.

“No, you’re in no good way to be going anywhere right now.”

“Don’t touch me,” Eric complained, knocking his hand away.

“I mean it. You’re not to move from this bed. If you choose to ignore me, I will command it,” he warned.

In response Eric smiled cynically, “Well, we wouldn’t want to *force* you to do that.”

“You don’t need to get up; you need to rest.” Nathaniel tried to convince him.

“Stop making a fuss.” He coughed when he spoke and subsequently winced in pain immediately after, which only served to cause Nathaniel further distress.

“Would you just lay back down and rest?” he muttered, irritated.

“Stop trying to tell me what to do. I’ll do what I want, and I want to sit up.”

“You’re still very hurt, Eric. Would it kill you to listen to me just once?”

“It nearly killed me the last time, so maybe,” Eric retorted bitterly, and Nathaniel clenched his teeth in annoyance.

“I can go check on your friend for you.” I offered softly to defuse the tension, and he nodded in agreement.

I left them shortly after that, hoping neither would do anything to agitate the other while I was gone. Due to the late hour, the hospital was quiet then, and all of Mr. Walsh’s guests had left. Leaving behind a chair piled high with presents, flowers, and cards. He was still asleep when I entered, and I paused to read through some of the messages.

They were all wishing him well and filled with pointless words of encouragement. Did others truly find that kind of thing helpful? Regardless, it made me curious. What kind of a person was he to have so many people who cared for him? I had followed him for a time, while trying to find Eric, and he had always stopped to speak with anyone who interrupted his day. Was he well-liked because of that?

I took one of the cards and set it on the table beside him. Perhaps the ink on it would bring him some comfort. I could see why Eric liked him so much; he was a handsome man, if not in need of a shave. I noticed as I watched him that his brow was creased slightly, and I brushed his cheek with the back of my hand to soothe him without even thinking about it. He relaxed then. That was good. Eric would be pleased to know he was alright.

When I returned, Eric and Nathaniel were speaking much more amicably. It seemed to be the first proper conversation they had in a long time, and I felt mild guilt interrupting as they stopped talking as I entered.

“Calla,” Eric greeted me, and I moved to sit by his side, leaning against his arm, “Is Charles awake yet?”

“Not yet. But he is resting well.”

“Nathaniel won’t let me have my cane back, but I’ll go see him as soon as I can walk.”

“I will let you have it back, when you’re well enough.”

I already knew they were about to argue again.

“Withholding aid from a cripple is cruel, you realize.”

Nathaniel scoffed, “It’s not cruel if it’s to prevent you from being reckless.”

“I’m not being reckless. I’m fine!”

“You’re not at all fine. One badly placed clot, and you’ll die.”

“I’ll be fine,” Eric repeated bluntly.

“*Please*. You’re lucky to be alive.”

They continued to squabble back and forth until they were yelling, but I stopped paying attention. I knew by now that their bickering was more or less how they showed they cared, and I hoped they wouldn’t take it too far. Eventually, movement in the doorway caught my eye, and I looked over to see Charles standing there, using his IV pole for support.

Eric stopped immediately when he noticed he was there, and they spoke briefly. Charles was concerned about my presence, which was understandable as I had shot an arrow at him once before. Though he seemed more nervous of Nathaniel as the man glared at him with distaste. Even more so when Charles sat on the end of Eric’s bed.

“You’re sure you’re alright?” Eric asked him for perhaps the hundredth time.

“Oh yeah, I’m having the time of my life.” Charles responded light-heartedly, then added more apologetic, “I’m sorry I couldn’t resist; I couldn’t fight it like you told me to…”

“Stop it. You’re only human. You can’t expect the impossible from yourself.”

“I nearly killed Claire as well… And you, you’re incredible. If it was you who was possessed, I’m sure you would have been able to fight it.”

“That’s not true.”

“Nothing could possess you over my contract,” Nathaniel interjected, and Eric moved a hand to cover the marks on his neck self-consciously.

“Thank you for the reminder.”

“You needed it.” He said plainly, then spoke directly to Charles, “Besides, human, you’re not free of the curse.”

“What do you mean he’s not free of it?” Eric questioned tensely.

“As per your wishes, Eric, I was not to kill him. And removing the curse mark from his heart completely would have left a significant hole.”

“I’m sorry; what does that mean?” Charles asked, nervous, while Nathaniel sat back, folding his arms as Eric elaborated.

“Do you remember the curse I removed from your hand?”

Charles subconsciously rubbed the indent in his palm, “Yes.”

“Curses are similar to cancers. They attach and grow into things. I could pull that one out because it wasn’t attached to anything you needed. The new curse you have is attached to your heart, apparently. Which means removing it would kill you… I’m not sure of the consequences of keeping it,” he admitted.

“I’ve sealed it, for now. The seal will need to be redone every so often. Nothing works all that effectively against witches' magic. That’s why we consider it to be filthy.” Nathaniel explained.

“Will he be alright?”

“He will be fine. However, moments of weakness will wear out the seal faster.” He shrugged, “Your friend isn’t prone to weakness, now is he?”

“No,” Eric responded bluntly, but Charles looked nervous as if that wasn’t the answer.

“Then he will be fine.” Nathaniel repeated, “However, you will not be. I saw the energy of another fae there, besides Markos and I. I couldn’t tell who it was, but it’s clear that this was a deliberate attempt to kill you. As I said before, it was probably my brother. So I would like you to return to the castle.”

“I’m not doing that. I don’t care if it’s your brother or not.”

“Don’t make me order you,” he growled, though it looked like he immediately regretted making the threat when Eric responded coldly.

“I would sooner kill myself than return to that wretched castle. You’re just the same as you always have been. You think the best thing to do in this

type of situation is to remove me from my life entirely. I have friends here, and I enjoy my job, Nathaniel. You can't just decide how I should live because you think you know better than I do."

"Your friends can come too if that's what you're concerned about."

"You're missing the point entirely."

"No, you're being impossible. My brother will **kill** you, and your friends, and likely everyone else in this town. Please. Eric. Be reasonable for *once*." Nathaniel was frustrated; it was plain to see.

"I said no. Especially more so if your solution to me saying no is to threaten me."

"If it's any help, I could use a roommate. So you can stay with me." Charles offered innocently.

"Thank you, Charles. That sounds like a much better idea," Eric agreed without hesitation.

"Fine, die then. I'm not coming to save you again." Nathaniel stated harshly as he stood to leave the room.

"I didn't ask you to the first time!" Eric shouted after him.

We all sat in an uncomfortable silence for a short moment before Eric suddenly pushed the bedsheets off himself and attempted to stand. He stumbled, of course, and cursed himself for it. Using the furniture for support, he moved to follow after his master, and I hurried to help him. It was foolish for him to do this, but I wasn't going to tell him he couldn't.

"Nathaniel. Wait," he demanded, and the man reluctantly stopped.

"What." He snapped, then seemed to realize Eric was also in the hallway, "What are you *doing*? Get back to bed, you foolish-."

"Shut up," Eric cut him off, "Thank you."

Nathaniel looked like he was about to lose his temper initially, but being thanked caught him off guard, and he couldn't formulate a response as Eric continued. "For saving Charles's life, and mine… And for not commanding me just now even though I know it's what you wanted to do."

"…Just, go back to bed." He sighed after a long moment.

For once, Eric did as he was told. Returning to his bed, he and Charles spoke at length. The human made light remarks and jokes, which seemed to

keep Eric in a good mood, and I have to admit, even I found it endearing. I preferred this one far better than his sister. Unfortunately, Claire also came to visit not long after Nathaniel left. Markos wasn't with her, so I assumed the masters must have been discussing their next actions.

"Hi, Eric," Claire said shyly.

"Are you okay?" he spoke calmly.

"Yeah, I'm fine… But I, ah, well… I-" She struggled, taking in a deep breath, "I'm sorry. For the things I said to you. You know, before. I was wrong, *so*, **so** wrong about you, and I hope you can forgive me."

"It's fine. I know you were just upset over your brother," Eric assured with remarkable understanding. I don't know how he had so much tolerance in him.

She smiled then and moved to hug him tightly, catching him by surprise. He didn't push her away as I expected he might, but he didn't return the hug either. "I'm really sorry," she repeated.

"You're hurting him," I reminded her flatly. Clearly, she had no regard for his injuries or his personal space.

"Oh! Sorry, again, I'm *so* sorry." She said quickly, letting him go.

"It's okay," he repeated, but he looked tired. I decided then that it was enough of his visitors.

"You should leave, now. Both of you." I told the pair, and they agreed without argument.

"I'll come see you tomorrow," Charles said in farewell while Claire reiterated her apologies.

Once they were gone, I insisted Eric lay back down and he did. He left enough space for me beside him, and I carefully laid down with him. "Thank you, Calla…"

"Of course," I assured, cuddling close to him and resting my head on his shoulder carefully.

"When do you think you will leave?"

"When the masters decide it."

"I wish you could stay."

I couldn’t respond then. Admitting I wanted to stay would be treasonous, and I was sure he understood because he made no further comment as he closed his eyes to rest.

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Epilogue
Not Possessed Anymore, at Least?

Charles Walsh: January, 1999.

I don’t know how much time passed before I woke again. But when I did, I was in another hospital room hooked up to a drip. Bandages covered the majority of my torso, one arm, and a leg on the same side. The chair beside my bed was piled with boxes of chocolates, flowers, and balloons that read ‘Get Well Soon!’. I took a second to orientate myself and realized I could hear laughter from the room across the hall.

Using the IV stand to support myself; I gingerly got up to follow the sound. In the next room, Claire was sitting up in her hospital bed, smiling and laughing with a tub of custard in her hands. She was wearing a blue hospital gown, one of her eyes was bruised a deep purple, her hair a mess, and her arm was in a cast. But none of that stopped her from shoveling the food into her mouth.

The man I had heard called Markos was sitting on the end of her bed. He watched her with an expression somewhere between pure confusion and mild interest as she chattered away to him. I got the impression that they knew each other, and I wondered exactly how much I had missed while I was held hostage.

“Usually, hospital food is *soo* bad, but this is good. I mean, it’s *actually* good.” She was trying hard to convince him.

“I wouldn’t know,” he answered bemused.

“Ohhh, you can eat it though, right? I mean, I’ve seen you eat stuff… So surely you can eat this? I swear it’s good! You should try some, do you want to try some? Here!” she insisted, and all but forced the spoon of custard at him.

He looked like he was struggling to find a way to politely decline her offer but couldn’t quite manage to come up with anything in time as he reluctantly accepted being fed. I think he surprised himself.

“Gosh, you don’t need to look so constipated; it’s just custard!” Claire laughed harder, then she noticed me, “Charles, you’re awake!”

“Yeah, how are you?” I asked, feeling a twinge of guilt.

“Oh, I’m fine now!” she assured me quickly.

“Where are the others?”

“They’re in Eric’s room. I don’t think he’s awake yet. But this is Markos,” she introduced me.

“Nice to meet you,” he said pleasantly. But when he looked over to me a chill ran down my spine, I hadn’t noticed his eyes were purple before.

“You too…” I said half-heartedly, then told Claire, “I’m going to go see Eric.”

“Okay!”

***

I hobbled down the hallway, checking each room as I went. Although it was hardly necessary as raised voices echoed down the hallways.

“You placed a gift on my lungs!” it was definitely Eric shouting.

“They were full of holes!”

“You had no right!”

“You seem happy enough to use them to yell at me now, so I don’t see what the problem is.”

Irritated silence.

“What did you expect me to do? You weren’t going to make it! Next time I’ll simply let you die then?” Nathaniel continued, exasperated when Eric didn’t answer him.

“That would be preferable.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he snorted.

“It’s *my* life, Nathaniel. You don’t get to preside over whether or not it ends-” He stopped when he spotted me in the doorway. Nathaniel was sitting beside him on one side of the bed, and the girl Calla was resting against him on the other side. Overall he looked alright, only a few bruises and bandages around his head, but he was in no way as broken as the rest of us.

“Charles,” he greeted me, surprised. “Calla just checked on you a few minutes ago, and you weren’t awake.”

“He wasn’t,” she agreed in monotone.

“You know her?” I asked skeptically, remembering she had previously shot an arrow at Claire and I.

“It’s okay. She won’t hurt you,” Eric assured.

I chose to believe him on that point as I stepped into the room. But I have to say; it was Nathaniel that made me nervous. His eyes weren’t the teal blue I had seen before, they were instead a lustrous green, and they watched me suspiciously as if I would hurt Eric again.

“Not possessed anymore. I promise,” I joked to lighten the mood.

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